

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

by the same author

THE SILENCE OF COLONEL BRAMBLE
GENERAL BRAMBLE

ARIEL
BYRON
CAPTAINS AND KINGS
DICKENS
DISRAELI
MAPE



The bombing of G. H. Q. Boulogne, May 1940

ANDRÉ MAUROIS

The Battle of France

translated from the French by

F. R. LUDMAN

LONDON

John Lane The Bodley Head

Mohanlal Dosehlai Shah.

BOOKS AGENT

RAJKOT. (Kathiawar)

First published 1940

**Printed in Great Britain by
STEPHEN AUSTIN AND SONS, LTD., HERTFORD
for JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LIMITED
8 Bury Place, London, W.C. 1**

CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	9
<i>Author's Foreword</i>	11

PART I

Pictures of the British Armies

1 Hereditary Friends	15
2 Warning	22
3 The Commander-in-Chief	30
4 Lancers Unhorsed	42
5 A.A.	48
6 Interior	56
7 Three Cheers for the King	63
8 A Stroll with the Padré	70
9 Commandments	77
10 Christmas in Lorraine, New Year in Périgord	80
11 Liaison	83
12 Sappers	88
13 In The Maginot Line	95
14 Tanks	101
15 The British Army in Training	108
16 In the Shadow of the Factories	115
17 England at War	122
18 Lines of Communication	127
19 A Visit from the Commander-in-Chief	133

CONTENTS

20 The Shell of the Lobster	13
21 Reconnaissance	14
22 Narvik	14

PART II

THE THIRTY DAYS' WAR

1 Maginot Peace	15
2 General Giraud	16
3 Admiral Abrial	16
4 Paris before the Offensive	16
5 Into Belgium	17
6 Into the Battle Zone	17
7 Retreat	18
8 The Defence of Arras	18
9 Royal Air Force	19
10 A Leader	19
11 Last Days in Paris	19
12 London	20

ILLUSTRATIONS

Bombing of G.H.Q., Boulogne, May, 1940	<i>frontispiece</i>
With the 300th—On the Move	24
With the 300th—Working party in the rain	32
Brigade H.Q.	52
With the 300th—Billets at Merris	86
The Brigadier at Bailleul	134
Bofors at Tournai, May, 1940	174
Priest begging for a lift in Louvain, May, 1940	180

¶ All the above are reproduced from the original drawings by Edward Ardizzone, official War Office Artist. Crown Copyright reserved.

FOREWORD

THIS is a strangely built book. The first part —‘Pictures of the British Armies’—might be called: ‘Fool’s Paradise, or the War without a War.’ It is made up of sketches of the B.E.F. which were published in Paris each week from the beginning of November.

I had been asked by the Army Council to accompany the British forces as French official Eyewitness. I was delighted to have the opportunity of joining my old friends once again. We were full of hope. I spent at G.H.Q., and with the armies, several happy months.

When I read what I wrote then, in perfect good faith, I wonder why and how we did not realize at once that our numbers were too small, our equipment scanty, our defence inadequate. As a matter of fact, we did realize it from time to time, but there was a conspiracy of optimism. Strict censorship and misplaced loyalty combined to discourage criticism. If these sketches are now still worth reading, it will be mainly because of their significant omissions.

The second part of this book is a diary of the

FOREWORD

Thirty Days' War. Most of it was written, not for publication, but for myself. It is not perhaps the whole truth, but all of it *is* true—too terribly true.

ANDRÉ MAUROIS

London, July 1940

PART I

Pictures of the British Armies

1

Hereditary Friends

[8th November, 1939]

EVER since dawn the rain had been falling. A sombre panoply hung over the topmost branches of leafless trees. Green and brown lorries, with their loads of khaki-clad soldiers filed endlessly towards a mysterious front. Around us in the country lane, the caterpillars of the tractors and the boots of the soldiers were creating that prodigious mud, thick and clinging inexorably, that one sees only in time of war. So much alike were the scenes that I could almost have believed myself borne back by some evil dream to that day of 1915 when, on the Béthune road, I watched the divisions that were going to fight the Battle of Loos moving up to the line.

Almost, I say, for a few details dated the picture.

Nowadays, the English troops wear, to work in and fight in, their 'battle-dress', which is a combination garment of khaki cloth, broken by innumerable pockets. It is something of a ski-ing costume or a flying suit—a mechanic's overalls even. Last year you may have seen Wells's film, 'The Shape of Things to Come'; the British Army of to-day

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

dresses like the heroes of that anticipation. The silhouette is completed by a forage cap. A colonel's uniform is almost the same as his men's. And even the Scottish, when on active service, may perhaps swap their multi-coloured kilt for the new battle-dress. The picturesque has been drummed out of the armies.

In its place mystery envelops them. In 1914 military secrets were not too well guarded. The plans for the offensives were discussed in the drawing-rooms of London and Paris. In 1939 the British Army has brought the art of camouflage almost to the point of invisibility. Thousands of men, wagons, guns and cars vanish into the countryside, mingle indistinguishably with the haystacks, the woods and the farms, drape themselves with nets, sea-weed and branches and then disperse so ingeniously that finding them becomes a game, which is made more difficult by the strictness of orders and 'I don't know'—the soldier's inevitable answer to any question.

In 1914, if you wanted to visit the headquarters of the Nth Division, you rang up one of its officers and he would tell you: 'We're at Poperinghe.' In 1939 you cannot call up any formation unless you know its code name. You will be told, for instance, that the Nth Division is called 'Curtain'. The next morning, when you pick up the field telephone, your faithless memory will whisper instead of

HEREDITARY FRIENDS

'Curtain', 'Concert'. And then you will be lost, for the operator will say: 'I don't know Concert,' and if you ask what the name of the Nth Division is, will repeat inflexibly, inevitably, 'I don't know.'

But when, with miraculous patience, you have at length discovered the unit you are looking for, you will find that the atmosphere is just what it was before. The colonel, a good soldier, serious and a little frigid: his adjutant-major, submerged beneath brigade and divisional documents: the sporting *padré* who plays cricket for his county: the interpreter who now calls himself a liaison officer, the only Frenchman in the regiment and for that reason treated as a precious article, at once admired and chaffed, whose job it is to replenish the kitchen, stimulate conversation, and run the radio: and then 'Madame', who is the proprietress of the house, be it *estaminet*, farm, or *chateau*, in which the mess has been installed.

'Madame is most generous. . . . She doesn't wait to be asked, she just offers. . . . She thinks of everything. . . . She has helped our cook with the dinner. . . . Our own mothers couldn't look after us better. . . .' Such were the eulogies I heard on all sides. Everything seems easier than in 1914. There was then, in the beginning, a faint mutual distrust. The Englishman had a feeling that he was there to defend France and everything was his right: the Frenchman was a little surprised to find him there.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Nowadays, the Englishman knows that it is his own country he is defending on our frontiers: the Frenchman is beginning to know this 'hereditary friend' of his. The general of 1939 shows the Military Cross he won at Vimy, at Thiepval: the twenty-year old soldier is the son of a veteran of 1914 and seeks out the little wood where his father was wounded. The shades of Britons people the whole countryside and I sometimes have a feeling when I come across some high personage whom I knew as a captain and some lieutenant who is the grandson of my general of other days, that I myself am a ghost.

The 3.45

'They're pretty smart, your Frenchmen,' said the general of artillery with a smile, 'What do you think of this? One of my captains had had orders to get a battery of heavy guns in position along a railway embankment, and when he found that the meadows were too muddy to stand up to the weight of the tractors, got the bright idea of using the permanent way to move the guns. By going in by one level-crossing and out by another, he could run his guns comfortably along the sleepers. But unfortunately, the sleepers were slippery and the tractor skidded and got wedged between the rails. And all the

efforts of the captain and his men failed to dislodge it. The confounded thing went forward well enough but refused to clear the obstacle.

'The station at H—— is not very busy in war-time, but nevertheless one express, the 3.45, called every day. The captain, who had been most careful to find out these details, began to feel nervous when, towards noon, he realized that he was completely unable to clear the permanent way of its obstacle. At 3 o'clock he went sheepishly to see that station-master at H—— and explained the position.

'We are,' he said, 'in a mess.'

'And why, captain?'

'Because we've put a lorry on your track and can't get it off and because the train's due very soon.'

'And you're letting a little thing like that upset you? It can all be arranged quite simply, so please don't disturb yourself, captain.'

'Punctually at 3.45 the express arrived. The station-master had a few words with the guard and then with the driver. The engine was unshackled and proceeded smoothly to the point where the tractor had been left, carefully introduced its buffers under the motor, raised it and with a few turns of its wheels, deposited it gently outside the rails. Whereupon the engine rejoined its carriages and the tractor its convoy. But the captain will remain all his life a passionate admirer of French railways. And now, every day, when the 3.45 passes by the battery

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

the driver whistles, slows down and calls amiably, over the hedge:

'Any other little thing we can do for you, captain?'

I Meet General Bramble

'Aurette!'

'You, sir!'

I watched General Sir John Bramble as he came into the drawing-room of the little French hotel. His hair and moustache had whitened, but he was still a superb soldier, and now and again a charming, almost childlike smile lit up his face.

'And what brings you here, Sir John?'

'I am a King's Messenger,' said the General.

'Which means? . . .'

'It means that I bring from England to the Commander-in-Chief papers that are too secret to be trusted to the post.'

'Do you come over often?'

'Two or three times a week, as is necessary.'

'Six crossings a week? It must be terribly tiring, Sir John.'

'I am never tired,' he said proudly. . . . 'All the same, the sea was shocking this morning. But it was quite interesting because there were mines adrift that had to be avoided. . . . You will dine with me?'

And while we were eating he told me of his

children: his eldest son was a general of the artillery, two of his grandsons sailors.

‘One of them,’ he said, ‘went straight from Eton into the Navy. He’s twenty-one and already second in command of a destroyer. He’s just had forty-two days afloat without putting in. The other was in the sick-bay of the —— when it was sunk. The life-boat to which he had been allotted had been destroyed by the torpedo. He was tossed in pyjamas from ten feet into another boat they were lowering, fell into the sea, and was sucked in by the vessel as she foundered. When he came to the surface he saw an empty raft floating by and climbed on to it. A body that still moved feebly passed close to him and he hoisted it on to the raft and there he stayed for five hours, practically naked in the storm, with the unconscious man beside him. Then they were picked up by an American boat. They are getting along very well now. But it was quite a little adventure.’

And then the General was silent, while I myself thought of the countless boys, French and English, who, on the seas and above them, were prepared to face such little adventures.

2

Warning

[15th November, 1939]

THE autumn morning was cloudless and cold and a golden haze lay over the ground. We were standing on the brow of a grass-covered hillock that dominated a vast plain. Somewhere nearby a Scottish major, newly arrived from the Sudan, was complaining cheerfully that the change of climate would be the death of him. Suddenly a long wail of sirens rose from the mist that hung over the fields and woods.

‘Air-raid,’ said the major, pricking up his ears.

He blew his whistle and his men, sceptical, brought their gas-masks to the alert position and went down reluctantly towards the shelters. But the peasants who were pulling beetroots on the plain stayed where they were, their faces turned skywards. I joined them and asked:

‘Can you see anything?’

‘Certainly, lieutenant. There’s Fritz, up there.’

And doubtless they were right, for, a minute later, the A.A. opened fire. I could see the tiny white puffs of the explosions clearly, but not their target. And soon the planes went up, turned and

WARNING

hurled themselves in pursuit of their adversary, to me still invisible.

'English,' the beetroot-pullers said, knowledgeable.

We went back to the car and left for Douai, where we were due at noon. In every village, people stood on their doorsteps, scanning the sky. At the entrance to Douai we were stopped by a huge territorial, full of authority and business.

'No traffic during the warning, sir.'

'Very well. . . . We'll wait. . . .'

There were soon fifty cars and army lorries jammed in the entrance to the town and surrounded by women and children.

'It's hopeless,' the territorial said distressfully, 'they've been told to go down to the cellars and every one of them is out in the street.'

Came a curious cortège. In the first car a French priest and a British officer. In the lorry that followed, twenty English infantry leaning on reversed arms. And two buglers. Then an ammunition wagon. It was a soldier's funeral convoy: the rifles to fire the salvo and the bugles to sound *The Last Post*.

The territorial was at a loss. His instructions fell short of burials.

'*Ma foi*,' he said, 'I suppose I might just as well let him through . . . seeing that he's dead already. . . .'

The warning stayed unbroken until at length a

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

long cry from the sirens ended it. The whole column of cars moved forward. That evening, we learned that the German had been brought down by an English fighter.

The Squadron

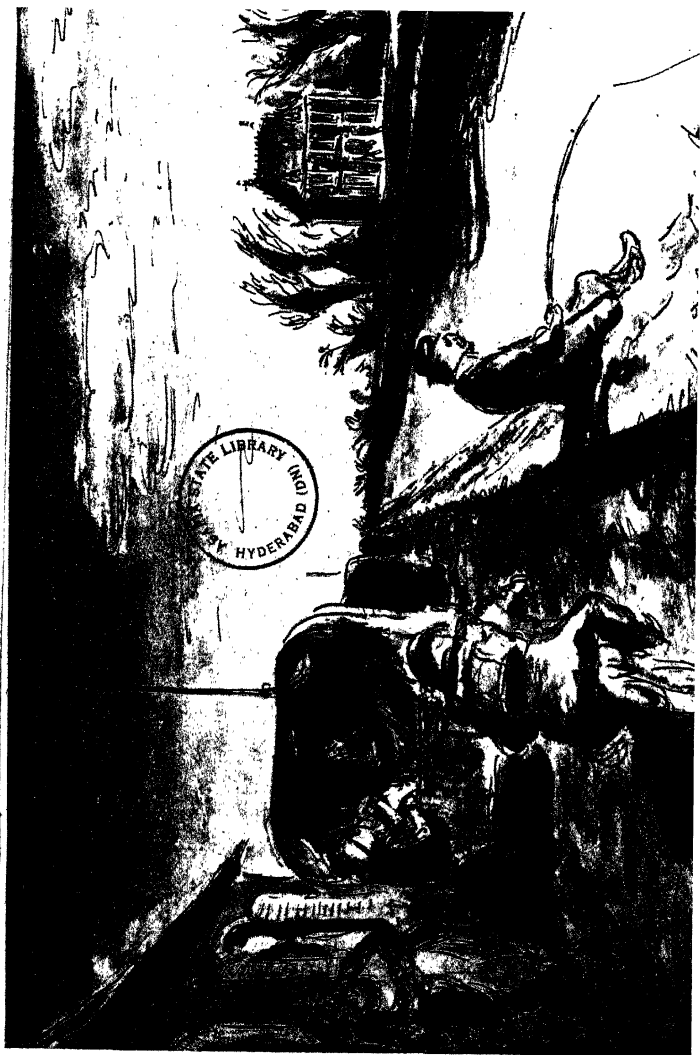
Next morning my friend Duncan and I had an amazing stroke of luck and while looking for another unit fell slap upon the victor's squadron. The machines, camouflaged into a jig-saw puzzle of blue, yellow, and brown stretched in line the length of a field, ready to take the air at five minutes' notice. A group of young officers in their wide-lapelled overcoats of light blue-grey, the colour of an Ile-de-France sky, were pacing the muddy road. Duncan, knowing one of them, made the inquiry.

'We're waiting for the Air Vice-Marshal,' he was told, 'he's coming along to congratulate the people who did some good work yesterday. Would you care to see them?'

'I should indeed. . . . What did they do exactly?'

'One of them, N——, the little lieutenant you see over there, brought down single-handed a Heinkel bomber with a crew of four. Two others think they got the second plane. . . . But we're actually waiting for confirmation of that. . . .'

'And you lost nobody?'



With the 200th—On the Mo

WARNING

'Nobody—not a scratch. A few holes in the wings. Come and meet N——.'

N—— was very young and fair, almost fragile: in features rather like Pierre Fresnay. His modesty and simplicity were immaculate.

'Could you be so good as to let me have your impressions. Did you find it very exciting? Or was it just so much shooting practice for you?'

'No, it was exciting.'

He added, as if by way of apology:

'You must remember that it was my first scrap.'

'And did you stick to the principles you were taught during your training?'

'Oh yes. . . . And I found them good enough.'

'How did you know the Germans were on their way?'

'By telephone. I was in command of the watch planes. I was told that two Germans might be coming over. I sent two of our machines after one of them. I chased the other myself.'

'And what did you see?'

'First a black speck. I flew after him for a long time. Eventually I got near enough to distinguish the machine clearly. I let the German open fire first. I saw the bullets running round the machine. . . . Then I let fly and saw suddenly that he'd let down his wheels and was falling.'

'Why did he release his under-carriage? As a sign of capitulation?'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'I couldn't say. One of my bullets had cut his cable perhaps. . . .'

'And what then?'

'I went down after him to see what would happen. He landed in a field and finished up against a hedge. I came pretty low to make sure that no other fellow could bag my bird. . . . Then I went back to report.'

'And the German airmen?'

'There were four of them it seems. Two are seriously wounded. The pilot was untouched.'

At this moment N——'s superior officer arrived back from D—— where he had picked up details of the fallen plane.

'It was a reconnaissance,' he said, 'no bombs. Their provisions were still in the machine: sandwiches and chocolate in cellophane.'

The Squadron Leader spoke delightful French:

'You have confidence in your machines?' I asked him.

'Complete confidence. We think they're excellent. Would you care to see one a little closer? Go up . . . just as if you were mounting a horse, except that you put your right foot in the stirrup.'

And while I was admiring the terrible simplicity of the machine, he said quietly:

'You are the author of *Bramble*, aren't you? I could recite your book by heart.'

And leaning on the machine he murmured:

WARNING

‘—Les soldats passent en chantant:
“Mets tes soucis dans ta musette. . . .”
Il pleut, il vente, il fait un temps
A ne pas suivre une grisette.
Les soldats passent en chantant.
Moi, je fais des vers pour Josette.
Les soldats passent en chantant.
“Mets tes soucis dans ta musette.”’

Which, in all the circumstances, was for me delightful and touching to the point of embarrassment. God knows I would have given all my books just to be one of those youngsters: I dared not say so.

‘I should have liked,’ one of them said, ‘to have taken a few cigarettes to the pilot, but they’d already taken him off.’

Over our heads passed a full squadron of birds, flying in triangular formation.

Maurice

Somewhere in France, Maurice Chevalier, straw-hat over his ear, is singing for an audience made up entirely of French and British soldiers. He gets the same welcome from each section of the hall. When the song he is to sing is in French, he explains to the Englishmen, before he begins, in language both picturesque and apt, what they are going to hear:

‘You see. . . . It’s a song about the French

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

réservistes. . . . Réservistes. . . . You know what it means?’

The song is amusing and profound. It describes one of our reservist regiments. The colonel is a royalist, the commandant a moderate, the captain devout, the lieutenant a radical, the adjutant a socialist, and all those ingredients go to make excellent soldiers with one idea only: to be victorious together and find peace again. In its simple way it is a faithful portrait of France, of its superficial differences and its real solidarity. Would that it could be sung in all the cities of the countries that know nothing of ours!

And its effect on the audience of soldiers is startling. French and English alike clap, shout, and stamp for joy. It is more than enthusiasm: it amounts to adoration. ‘Encore, Maurice!’ And he comes back gracefully. What has made him successful is not only that with the moderation of all great artists, he remains always natural and never overloads his personality: it is also and primarily, that he has no vulgarity of soul. In the widest possible sense of a beautiful word, he is *generous*: he believes in goodness, courage, love.

The artists of pessimism depict perhaps, do depict indeed, aspects of human nature that are true enough, but they forget that man is after all a noble animal and that one does better to dwell on his liberty than on his slavery. The greatest of them,

WARNING

those who could reach the hearts of the huge audience of the people, are Dickens, Tolstoy, and the Hugo of *Les Misérables*. It is to the same sentiments that the art of Charlie Chaplin and of Maurice Chevalier in the simplest of forms, appeals.

3

The Commander-in-Chief

[22nd November, 1939]

A CARDBOARD notice: 'Office of the C. in C.' was on the door. An aide-de-camp, a magnificent Scottish officer in a Gordon kilt, kept me company, but in any case I had not long to wait. Another aide-de-camp appeared:

'The C. in C. will see you now.'

No great commander's office was ever simpler. His table was no more than a bare plank on a couple of trestles: a few maps hung on the wall: and sitting at the table was Lord Gort himself. I was struck at once by his air of youthfulness (he is fifty-three), vigour, and animation. When he was head of the Staff College it was said that the place seemed more like a foundry in full production than an academy, even a military one. He is very fond of walking and covers miles of our muddy countryside at a great pace. He is a skilled yachtsman: when he was forty-seven he learned to fly and it is one of his sorrows that his plane is not with him in France. And the Victoria Cross he wears, the hardest earned decoration in the world, is sufficient proof of his physical courage.

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

'And what did he get it for?' I had asked before I went in.

'Well, I must confess I don't really know exactly. . . . But whatever you do, don't ask him, because he hates talking about it. As far as I remember, he stayed at the head of his regiment, although seriously wounded, and carried on with an attack on the Nord Canal.'

The Commander-in-Chief held out his hand:

'The last time I saw you was on the 14th of July at the British Embassy in Paris.'

'You're right, sir. You have a good memory.'

He asked us to sit down and offered cigarettes. Conversation was easy: he spoke willingly and extremely well. Several times, when he touched upon technical questions of flying and gunnery, I had to admire the precision of his information and the clarity of his mind. He had a fund of sound sense and gaiety. And always that astonishing vitality, sensed in his laughter, his movements, in the rapidity of his speech. He spoke of a German aeroplane that had been brought down the day before, of the material and personnel of the German Air Force, of Hitler's probable plans (in connection with which he quoted a saying of Foch's: 'In War one does what one can'), of the necessity, if the present inaction were to be prolonged, of finding distraction for the troops. Then he described the fortified zone that now separates Germany from

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Russia, where the Germans are building a kind of Siegfried Line. And he contrasted this with the complete camaraderie that exists between the French and British armies.

'I am trying,' he said, 'to create opportunities for the two armies to meet one another. Neighbouring units are already exchanging visits, our lancers and your cuirassiers, for instance. It's a very good thing. . . .'

The cigarette he had given me had burned down to my fingers and I was looking round for an ash-tray.

'Throw it on the floor,' he said.

In the Line

When you come to a cantonment, you know immediately whether the battalion occupying it is well or ill commanded. If it is well commanded the men in the streets give you a franker salute: the sentries move more vigorously: the placards in front of battalion headquarters or the stores are better painted: the cars better kept: air-raid precautions more thorough. When we reached the village of O——, we knew at once, Duncan and I, that it was a fine regiment that occupied it and our journey up to the lines confirmed the correctness of this first impression.



We had visited the position three weeks before. Now it was hardly recognizable. Naturally it relied still upon the concrete block-house and the anti-tank ditches constructed by the French engineers before the war, but its depth had increased formidably. Well-protected strong points had been drained and the roads re-made. Behind the line of French block-houses, numerous squads were hard at it constructing other cement works. Already long steel hooks marked the outlines of the new casemates, while the cementers near by mixed the sand and gravel.

I asked if they were experts.

'Certainly they are. They're English cementers that have enlisted in the Engineers.'

'The difference you have made to this line in so short a time is amazing.'

'I'm happy to hear you say it. We ourselves are very grateful to the French General Staff for what we found when we came here. These pill-boxes are excellent. Would you like to see one?'

The little cement fort was surrounded by a lattice of barbed wire. It was occupied by a few English soldiers who manned the periscope, the anti-tank gun, and the machine-guns. The major spoke to the sergeant in command:

'Nothing to report?'

'No sir. The other day the farm people said they'd seen a parachutist come down in the wood in

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

front of us: we patrolled it and poked about among the bushes, but could find nothing.'

The wood was full of pheasants, partridges, and rabbits...

'As it's forbidden to shoot,' the Major said, 'I had a boomerang sent from England. You know the sort of thing, an Australian weapon which comes back to the feet of the thrower. But unfortunately I'm not very good at it, and I missed the pheasant and nearly cracked my own skull.'

Memories

By the time we got back from the lines we had spent several long hours in the mud and the cup of tea that was offered us was very welcome indeed. The Colonel joined us again. It was not hard to understand, when you saw him, why his was a brilliant regiment. He was a man still young: alive, confident, and of great personal charm. And with the major we fell inevitably to talking of the war of 1914 which, bound as it is to their youth, assumes an aura of enchantment in the memory of those men of forty-five.

'I have,' said the Colonel, 'few finer memories than that of our last attack on Ypres in September, 1918. For a long time that circle of hills had been for us a magic, insuperable barrier, and then at long

last we had reached its summit . . . we looked around us and saw the arms of our soldiers, line upon line of them, shining in the sun. It was the tide of victory coming in. It was wonderful. . . .’

‘I was in Italy at the time,’ the Major said. ‘My division had instructions to cross the Piave under enemy fire. The first day we took an island in the middle of the river. The sappers, under the protection of the gunners, had gone on in front and built pontoons. But to get from the island to the other bank meant taking to the water. It was quite amusing.’

‘Was it?’ I said. ‘You must have got pretty damp.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said, ‘the sun made short work of drying a tunic!’

‘And what about the non-swimmers?’

‘The Piave isn’t so very deep,’ the Major said. ‘The water was never more than chest-high. There was no real danger. Only the short ones were drowned.’

‘Man’s a strange and crazy creature,’ I said, ‘as soon as the present begins to seem monotonous, the anguish of the past becomes by contrast infinitely attractive. When danger threatens us, we hate it: yet when it has passed, we are full of regrets.’

‘Yes,’ said the Colonel, ‘one hears some queer things said sometimes. Last Sunday, General Bramble came to see me—You’ll probably know

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

that he used to command this battalion in the old days—We went off together to visit a little wood where we'd spent some pretty bad moments in 1917. It was a beautiful day: the air was fresh and grand to walk in, but the General, abstracted, was sniffing up the scent of the autumn leaves uneasily. I said to myself, "What the devil is he looking for anyway?" And suddenly he stopped short in front of a tree with his nose to the bark. He drew a deep breath and his face lit up as he said:

"Wait. . . . It smells of gas. It's lovely." "

There was a long silence.

'And did it really smell of gas?' Duncan said.

'I believe so. Anyway, my impression was the same as his. Perhaps a shell had been unearthed there recently. But after all, that's beside the point. What struck me was the way he said: "It's lovely." "

I turned to the young lieutenant who had been listening in silence:

'We must be boring you with all our stories of the last war.'

'Sometimes,' he replied. 'But think of the revenge I'm going to take on my children in twenty-five years' time!'

Mules from Missouri

Last evening the Quartermaster-General of the British Armies gave an excellent interview to the

English and American war correspondents on the subject of his department. His is the highly important and most formidable task of transporting the whole army and providing it with food, clothing, boots, and munitions. The journalists, enthralled, found in him a man young, brilliant, and dynamic, who remained standing with one foot on a chair while he spoke to them easily and without notes.

This is what he said, more or less:

‘Our task is far from simple. We’ve got to bring over to France a first expeditionary force of about 160,000 men (Don’t worry, lots more will follow them), carry them a distance of several hundred miles, and while we are doing it, see that they have all they require. We have to provide 25,000 vehicles with petrol and a considerable number of field and machine guns with ammunition. We can say to-day that this initial operation has been completely successful. More than just successful, in fact, for when our troops took up their final positions, they had three days’ food in advance.

‘You must appreciate that never in the whole of military history has transportation been undertaken on such a scale. The positions of our French allies and our German enemies are very different. They are operating on their own territory and their civil organization in time of peace is a great help when mobilization comes. Even our own position was easier in 1914, because we were nearer our bases and

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

also, of course, because the number of motorized vehicles was infinitely smaller.

'In present circumstances we require for each one of our men about a third of a ton of material of all kinds per month. Thus, when we have 300,000 men, we shall want 100,000 tons a month. If, one day, we have 900,000 men, we shall want 300,000 tons. Imagine the number of boats that that means, the movement in the ports, the trains and the convoys and you'll get some idea of the size of our effort.

'And, what is more, we have to face the fact that our ports and stations can be bombed and that the enemy might be able to hold up the continuous stream that feeds the army for one or several days. And so we've got to have a start. And we have it. In each base port, we are establishing a *depôt* where you can see square miles of bacon, tea, frozen meat, salt and pepper. At certain points, nearer the armies, we've set up advance *depôts*: from now on we shall have supplies both of food and ammunition for several weeks in advance, so that we are immune from any surprise.'

'Don't you think, sir,' an American correspondent asked, 'that if the weather were too bad this winter, automobile transport would become impossible in certain districts?'

'Certainly,' the Q.M.G. replied, 'we shall have to use horses.'

'And mules.'

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

'And mules, of course. I have the highest opinion of mules. . . . We shall buy them in Spain.'

The American looked very upset.

'In Spain?' he cried, 'when we have magnificent mules to sell in Missouri!'

The Q.M.G. smiled:

'We shall also buy them,' he said, 'in Missouri.'

The American regained his calm. And to-morrow the gigantic headlines of the Middle West newspapers will read:

'British Army Needs Missouri Mules.'

Tanks

The regiment of tanks had been drawn up in an ocean of mud, the men standing before their machines. The Colonel, in rubber wellingtons, leaned over each vehicle in turn, concerned about the efficiency of the wireless, the condition of the caterpillars.

'This mud,' he said, 'is bound to stretch them in the end. We've got to guard against it.'

'Is it true,' I asked him, 'that the Germans have had a lot of trouble with their tanks?'

'It probably is,' he said, 'but they don't care very much. Their policy is to take enormous risks. If only half their tanks get there, that half, they think, is enough to ensure victory. This succeeded in

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Poland because they had mastery of the air which enabled them, before their tanks advanced, to disorganize command. But it'll fail against us, because we're lucky enough to possess a strong force of fighter planes.'*

One after the other, the tanks filed past the Colonel. With the antennae of their wirelesses raised, they looked like something from the Middle Ages. From a distance it seemed as if the officer standing in the tower bore a lance. Despite the state of the ground, they completed the difficult course without a hitch.

'We have,' the Colonel said with satisfaction, 'an excellent repair shop.'

'Who runs it?'

'An engineer who specialized in pumps before the war. And I'm very glad that they haven't given us a professional garage-manager who was used to having all the necessary tools handy. He'd have moaned all day, while my little engineer uses what he's got and gets along marvellously. Here is our lorry-shop.'

All the parts, nuts, and bolts that might be required to repair these complicated motors were set out in carefully docketed compartments. An expert attended to the radio apparatus.

'Do they work all right?' I asked.

'Yes, quite well enough to transmit the sort of

* Yes, that sort of thing was said then by intelligent officers.

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

message we want. "Crest reached. . . . Enemy in sight. . . ."

'And do you have different wave-lengths for your various sections?'

'Of course. You have to give your drivers very precise orders, because they can't see a great deal through their narrow slits. Only this morning, blissfully ignorant of where they were going, they flattened out a liaison agent's motor-cycle: not knowing that the tanks were likely to start he'd left his machine in front of one of them. You should have seen the look on the face of that motor-cyclist when the machine was suddenly turned to ribbon before his eyes.'

'What about the driver of the tank?'

'He didn't even feel it,' said the Colonel.

4

Lancers Unhorsed

[22nd November, 1939]

WE were visiting the cantonment of a famous regiment of lancers, now motorized. Captain Duncan, my companion and guide, had served in the lancers of the old days and had been telling me on the way the story of his last charge.

'It was at Villers-Bretonneux. There was a battery about five hundred yards away that had been mowing down our infantry and I tried, between two bursts of fire, to get at it by charging with my platoon. And we should undoubtedly have got there had it not been for the damned barbed wire. But this stopped us dead. My horse was killed under me and I was wounded. I had to crawl back to our lines and jettison my sabre, which was just an encumbrance. And that's the end of the story—and of the cavalry.'

'And now the lancers have lances no more?'

'Nor horses either. But they're still a fine regiment, as you'll see.'

Which I did, and what I saw testified once again to tradition's power for good. The lancers, which

might have become a regiment of mechanics, had lost none of their aristocratic prestige. The young lieutenant, his breeches reinforced with yellow leather, had all the glamour of the horsemen of other days. The road which led to the cantonment was edged with gleaming petrol cans that recalled somehow the white-painted rails along the approaches to our own stud-farms. The garage had the spick and span look of a well-kept stable. And even the battle-dress assumed on the colonel of the lancers the air of an elegant uniform. Of him I asked:

‘What is your particular role?’

‘The same as before. We are still reconnaissance troops. We go on ahead to look for the enemy and we wireless to headquarters any information we can collect.’

‘Can’t your messages be intercepted?’

‘Yes, sure enough, but it doesn’t matter a great deal.’

‘The enemy can jam your transmissions?’

‘Then we have motor-cyclists.’

I went into one of the cars and wondered how it could hold in so little space so many things so neatly.

‘In the old days,’ said Duncan, ‘a lancer carried his lance, a rifle, a sabre, and his bayonet, which was as much as he could do. These motorized cavalrymen carry one mounted gun, machine-guns, and Lord knows what else!’

And he added lugubriously:

'As for me, I have been classed as a "non-motorizable cavalryman".'

But when I want to please Duncan, I tell him that motorized regiments are only useful to the extent that they copy the tactics of the cavalry.

Realism

Although his trenches were not particularly close to the enemy, it was the wish of General M—— that they should be occupied by the division for three days, just as they would be in battle. The strictest orders were issued to ensure that nothing should be lacking from the realism of the operation. All rations and munitions were to be brought up at night, and during the day there were to be no convoys on the roads, no cars waiting outside the control posts. Facing the trenches, in the zone which would be occupied by the enemy, the General had sent out observers, who, from factory chimneys and trees, had had instructions to note and signal all movements in our lines which were too visible.

Among the observers was a young artillery Lieutenant taken from one of the division's batteries. Perched upon a dove-cote, with his binoculars in his hands, he had watched with praiseworthy care every moving thing in the fields, the village, and the woods. Suddenly, at the top of the ladder which led to his

observation post there appeared a man in battle-dress. It was the General. The Lieutenant drew himself up and saluted.

'Anderson,' he said, 'Fourth Battery.'

'Have you seen anything?' asked the General.

'Yes, sir,' the Lieutenant replied proudly, 'I think I noticed an observation post—in fact I'm sure of it, for they've been looking after themselves very badly. . . . Can you see, sir, the little wood. . . . And about two finger-breadths after the last trees, two mills. . . . Well, sir, I've often seen suspicious groups going into the farm that lies behind the mills. Two men, evidently officers, talking something over, with map in their hands. Some soldiers have saluted them. Perhaps you'd care to take the glasses, sir, and see for yourself. One can hardly believe one's eyes.'

The General took a long look.

'You're right,' he said, 'they're certainly very careless people. I'll let them know what I think of them. Thank you, Anderson.'

The Lieutenant, very pleased with himself, thought pleasantly of the esteem in which he was now held by his supreme chief. But he never suspected that he had just lost what to him was infinitely more precious, the esteem of his immediate superior and the affection of his comrades. For the observation post which he had just convicted of such culpable negligence was that of his own battery.

The Model Village

A cantonment is as good as the officer that organizes it. Here was a French village, like all other French villages; call it, if you will, Berville. Its church is graceful and venerable, its farms severe and commonplace, its fields well-cultivated, its roads difficult, its inhabitants hard working and a little mistrustful. But a squadron of the Royal Air Force, commanded by a man that loves his job, has just installed itself and suddenly the village has been transformed, magically, into a Dickensian setting.

Almost all the men of the squadron come from P——. There they have their favourite pubs and they had hoped to find them once again at Berville. One of them has cut out floating ensigns in the English manner, and another painted them in red and gold on a black ground. And now they decorate the three cafés, lend them an air of gaiety that they had never had. In a barn that has been lent them, ingenious soldiers have put up a bar, a club-room, and a stage. They have installed electric light, a loud-speaker, and large stoves. The sergeant's mess, hung with cretonne and decorated with posters, looks like the hall of a little Stratford-on-Avon hotel.

And as for the officers, they have found 'somewhere in France' for their dining room wicker armchairs: little table-lamps with vivid shades

decorate the table cloth, and when the button is pressed all light up together, just as they might in a London restaurant. There is a red box in front of the military post office, decorated in white with the letters 'G.R.', executed in the purest archaic tradition. At the Squadron Leader's door the alarm bell has been fixed to posts that are bright blue. And all these colours sing and shine: the roads have been drained: even the worst of them made practicable by iron gratings.

'The gratings,' the Squadron Leader said, 'have been lent us by some French squadrons near here. Their commander, S——, is both father and mother to us.'

In the street, the children shout to him 'Hello!' and even 'Okay'—for such is the English that the cinema has taught them.

'If the Colonel were French, lieutenant,' an old woman said to me, 'he'd be appointed Mayor of Berville.'

And truly I should like to take to Berville certain men of little faith, and show them the miracles that can be wrought by a few pots of paint, a few planks, a hundred yards of copper wire, a little taste and much courage.

5

A.A.

[29th November, 1939]

THE rain, whipped by a squally wind, swirled about us. Water ran down our necks and underneath our oilskins. Our feet slithered in clay that was the colour of café-au-lait.

'Can you see the battery?' the General said.

'No, sir. All I can see is a flooded field.'

'Good,' he said, 'that shows how well my guns are camouflaged.'

Without warning, he leaned over a hole which he had discovered, miraculously, in the corner of a silo, and called:

'Barnett!'

A young second lieutenant rose from the earth and invited us down to his infernal realm. I wondered how he had managed to create in the sodden soil this warm, dry shelter. Down there a stove purred softly: a lantern like a miner's lamp threw its light over the walls and disclosed silhouettes of aeroplanes and photographs of actresses.

'The useful and the agreeable,' said the General.

As he went in the troglodytes that dwelt in these

sombre caverns rose to their feet and stood to attention:

‘Eyes front!’

‘Sit down,’ he said.

They were very cheerful, the troglodytes. Under the dank earth they sung, wrote letters innumerable, and waited for soup and the night.

Outside, beneath an awning of plaited straw, the spotters, who are replaced every half-hour, watched at the four points of the compass. The Lieutenant put on a show for us. The spotter signalled an imaginary aeroplane and with remarkable speed the guns were ready to fire.

‘Target on!’

‘Fire!’

The shooting is directed by the trembling needle of the predictor, that astounding apparatus with the brain of a dazzling arithmetician. To reach an aeroplane that is moving at a vaguely determined height at a speed of three to four hundred miles an hour presents a problem worthy of an Einstein, a problem only to be solved in four dimensions. The guns of the A.A. fire upon an aeroplane in the future. To the predictor, a metal box larded with frames, the officer submits the elements of the problem: the direction and speed of the wind, the height of the machine as determined by the telemeter, the speed of the aeroplane, *et cetera*. An equation has to be established between these data and the direction of

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

the firing. If the data are correct the resolved equation brings an aeroplane to earth. One's thoughts dwelt inevitably on the contrast between the prodigious ingenuity of this machine and the primitive dens that house those who serve it. Man's geometry can raise him up among the gods, if his grossness does not cast him down to Hell.

'One of our difficulties,' the Lieutenant said, 'is to distinguish between our own machines and the enemy's. And the Germans themselves, on their own admission, are continually making the same mistakes.'

Love of gunnery is a contagious passion. That evening in the cantonment, the French liaison officer and the *padré*, having acquired a matting target and arrows, were practising indirect fire. They had set up a screen between the marksman and the target. An observer signalled where the arrows fell and the marksman adjusted his aim accordingly. It is a game for the intelligent.

The Guards

You may have seen them in London, in their red tunics and great bearskins, mounting guard before Buckingham Palace: you may have admired the rigidity of their movements, the vigour with which they handle their arms, the elegance of their officers

when, their swords held vertically away from their bodies, they stride tirelessly between the immobile ranks: and you may be wondering now what the Guards are doing in this war. You must look for them no longer in the sentry-boxes of Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, but rather on a muddy plain that is pitted with beetroot. The bearskins and the red tunics have been left behind in England. Like the rest of the army, the Guards are in khaki. For their work in the trenches on this particular morning some of them had on over their cloth trousers the blue overalls they had bought in some French town or other. All of them, for it was cold, wore over their jackets the leather jerkins that had just been served out. The jerkins got a great welcome.

But beneath this work-a-day dress you can still recognize from brilliant detail and old habits that they are the Guards. The sentry at the entrance to the cantonment clicks his heels with inimitable energy before he presents arms. In the officers' mess the fine regimental drums are painted with the arms of the Crown and the glorious list of battles in which the Guards have played their part. I asked the French liaison officer whether he found them different from the others.

'Of course,' he said, 'their discipline is unique. If my torch happens to flash on a ranker talking to an officer at night, I'm sure to find that despite the

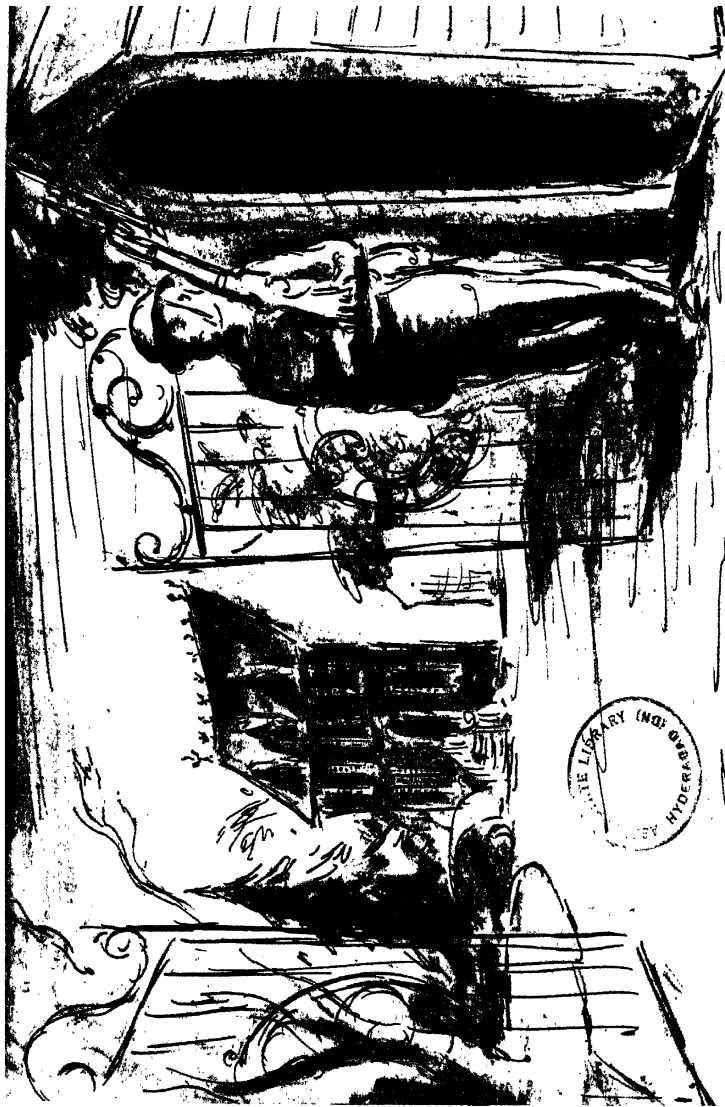
THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

darkness he is strictly to attention. If he were passing twenty yards behind his captain, who couldn't in any case see him, he'd salute as conscientiously as if he could be seen doing it.'

It was the first winter's day. The air was icy, the fields thick with frost, the sky swept of its clouds. But the mud had still to freeze and up to their ankles in the morass the Guards, with great energy and cheerfulness, were felling the trees that obscured their line of fire. Sitting in the open, propped up by a couple of spades, a private was receiving the attentions of the battalion barber. As we splashed through the puddles a young officer of the Welsh Guards told me of the regiment's journey through Paris.

'The men,' he said, 'were overwhelmed by the welcome they got. And, above all, amazed at the city itself. That evening, when I censored their letters, I found them unanimous: "We've never seen anything finer. . . ."'

We returned to the cantonment and once again the sentry's heels clicked violently. Once again his rifle was snatched from his shoulder with unbelievable energy. An automatism to stir a conscience. And the admiration I felt for them in front of Buckingham Palace in their great hats and tunics is a little thing compared with what I feel now for these exact giants that are watching in their battle-dress over the gateways to France.



The Milkwoman and the Milkcan

In one of the streets of B—— an R.A.F. car had skidded on the greasy surface and upset a little hand-cart laden with milk. The crash was violent enough to smash the flimsy shaft. Milk flowed from an upturned can and spread over the roadway. Much discomfited, the officer driving the car pulled up and got out. His companions were not so serious:

‘Rotten landing, Bill!’

The neighbours, brought to the scene by the noise, had plenty to say:

‘*Ah bien!* What’s the milkwoman going to say when she comes back?’

‘Where is the milkwoman?’

‘She’s at No. 8, M. Metayer’s, delivering his milk. . . . She comes here from the next village every day and pulls the cart herself. . . . It’s her living. . . . What’ll happen to her now? She’ll want five hundred francs from you at the very least.’

Which brought great joy to the hearts of the car’s passengers.

‘Five hundred francs! Come on Bill, pay up! *Tout de suite* . . . and the tooter the sweeter!’

At this juncture the milkwoman arrived. An old woman she was, in apron and bodice, her hair white, her face thin and weary. The sight of the milk lying in the roadway struck to her heart.

‘*Jésus!*’ she cried, ‘my milk!’

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'It was Bill, madame,' the airmen chorused, 'it was Bill . . . and he's going to make it all right.'

Bill, in his own French, explained that he was more than sorry, that he was willing to pay the cost of the repairs, the broken bottles and the spilled milk. . . . The milkwoman shook her head.

'The money,' she said, 'is nothing. But who is there to mend my cart?'

'Well,' said Bill, 'surely there are carpenters in this village.'

'No, my good monsieur: all the wheelwrights have been mobilized.'

A neighbour intervened.

'Wait,' she said, 'there is that joiner . . . Laplume. Surely you know him.'

'No,' said the milkwoman.

'Surely you must. The one with the red hair, who married the chair-maker.'

'Ah!' said the milkwoman, 'that's not Laplume: it's Laprune you mean.'

And then began a long and impassioned dialogue between the two women on the subject of Laprune, his ancestry, his political opinions, his calling, while the airmen, still waiting, shouted:

'Pay up, Bill. *Tout de suite!* Let's get started.'

Timidly Bill interrupted the saga of the Laprune family:

'Madame, if you'll tell me how much, I will pay . . . *tout de suite.*'

'And how can I tell, my good monsieur? What with the milk, the cart, the bottles and all, it goes pretty nigh a hundred and fifty francs.'

The neighbour nudged her.

'You're not asking enough, Madame Lefranc: you'll be out of pocket.'

But Bill, relieved at such moderation, took from his wallet the two notes:

'You're sure it's enough?' he said.

'Ah!' said the milkwoman, 'if you knew how much I feel for you, *mes pauvres enfants*. . . . How it hurts me to make you spend all this money. . . .'

She spoke in the tone of a grandmother that has grandsons at the front, and her 'If you knew how much I feel for you, *mes pauvres enfants*' came patently from her heart. In any case it was true that she had asked the least possible of them, and, frugal Frenchwoman that she was, regretted the unnecessary expense as much for them as for herself. Bill and his friends sensed the inflexion of her voice and understood it with me, and before they got back into the car, saluted the milkwoman respectfully.

Interior

[6th December, 1940]

THE low house with the tiled roof seemed to rise out of the watery plain as naturally as did the trees that surrounded it. Outside the wind was icy, but as soon as the door opened the warmth from the great stove enveloped you. A polished walnut sideboard, with old elegant curves, graced one of the walls. Over it hung devout prints, presented by the newspaper *La Croix*. At the table sat a young English corporal, a boy still, painstakingly writing a long, long letter. In an armchair an old French workman, very pale, panting: and standing at his side his wife, she too old, yet fresh and hale, trying to make him swallow a little soup.

‘Papa is not well,’ she said to the corporal sadly.

‘Not well?’ he answered, slowly shaking his head.

She turned to me.

‘Fred calls us Papa and Maman. He’s here every day to write his letters and warm himself and dry his things. Those are his puttees in front of the fire. The mobilization has taken our sons and our grandsons, so it does us good to have a nice boy like

INTERIOR

this one about the house, always willing to lend a hand. Fred, help me lift Papa up so we can put his cushions straight.'

'Yes, Maman,' said the young corporal, leaving his letter.

'Do you understand one another?' I asked her.

'Only by signs,' she said, 'but I'm teaching him a few words here and there. Ah, these wars, we're used to them here. Six hundred years my husband and his family have been in this house. You see that hole in the ceiling. . . . That was a bullet fired by an Austrian in the time of the Emperor. He was cleaning his rifle.'

The invalid nodded.

'Yes,' he said, 'my grandfather used to tell the story.'

'And the sideboard, Monsieur, was his grandmother's. It has always been in the family. And it's not the first time we've had the English here either. But this one is especially nice, aren't you, Fred?'

Fred, who had gone back to his letter, raised his head and said:

'Yes, Maman,' without having understood a word.

The old woman smiled maternally.

And I blessed that in human nature which could recreate in the midst of the tempest this tiny paradise, warm and kind.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

The Rival Churches

The Catholic and the Anglican chaplains had just finished a long tour of the base cantonments, the lines of communication and then the troops in the line itself. They had got on very well together.

‘We’ve travelled together,’ they said, ‘eaten together, but, thank God, we haven’t had to sleep together. We’ve always had the luck to find a couple of beds.’

In the evening they were interviewed by the journalists, and felt, according to one of them, like Daniel in the lions’ den.

‘I asked the Adjutant-General’s advice as to what I should say, and all I got from him was: “Give ’em a sermon or take a collection.”’

Actually, they proffered some interesting information. The British Army allows one chaplain to each eleven hundred men. On this basis, one half are Church of England, a quarter Roman Catholics, with the remaining quarter split up between the other Protestant churches. The men seemed more religious than in the last war. They communicated and confessed more freely.

‘Isn’t that explained,’ asked a sceptical American, ‘by the present inaction?’

‘It’s true enough,’ said Father C——, ‘that this is a very wearisome war. I’ve known the Boer War. I’ve known the Great War. But this is the Great Bore War. All the same, there’s something else in

INTERIOR

it. . . . The men are more serious-minded. I can see it in the letters I censor.'

'Aren't you ever asked, Father, if it is a sin to kill an enemy?'

'Never. There are no conscientious objectors in the army. Besides, the theological reply would be unequivocal, and I believe my friends of the Anglican church are of the same mind. It is the duty of every soldier to kill the enemy. Especially when a war is, like this one, a crusade to save Christian civilization. But in any case, as I have said, the question has never been asked.'

And then he explained the services which a chaplain can render a soldier outside the spiritual and purely religious sphere. He is their confidant. With him they are not afraid to be sentimental, show him the photographs of their wives and children they all carry in their pockets but keep away from their comrades for fear of having their legs pulled.

'Will eminent ecclesiastics be visiting the front?'

'I can't see any for the moment,' said the Anglican chaplain with a smile, 'apart from us two.'

And the journalists laughed in acknowledgment that the Churches had won the round.

Royal Signal Corps

The telephone cable was being laid in a shallow trench along the roadside by a few English soldiers

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

and a gang from the French *P.T.T.* None of the Englishmen spoke French and none of the Frenchmen English. But a few gestures were all that was necessary.

'A trade,' said the General, as we looked on, 'is a strong bond between man and man. I remember how, during the last war, we used German prisoners who were electricians for the same sort of work behind the lines. One of them, who called himself Johann, was an exceptionally fine workman. One day he went sick and had to spend forty-eight hours in hospital. While he was away my own soldiers finished off a job he'd started.

'They did it well enough to serve its purpose, but without the technical mastery of the German prisoner. Toward nightfall I came across them, silently contemplating the finished job.

"'Anything wrong?'" I asked as I went up to them.

"'Sir,'" one of them said, "we were wondering whether you'd let us have your authority to relay this line during the night. You see, Johnny'll be coming back to-morrow and we can't let him see a job like this.'"

'What do you think of the French *P.T.T.* men?' I asked.

'They're splendid workmen,' replied the General, 'and amazingly obliging. We could never have been ready so soon but for them. You've got to

INTERIOR

remember that when an army takes up its position, each headquarters expects to be able to telephone immediately to all its divisions, battalions, and bases. . . . That may seem a pretty simple business, until you come to think of the miles of line that the improvised system involves. It was a very different story in the last war. First of all, our officers were not telephone-minded as they are to-day. When they had something to say they either wrote a dispatch or sent a telegram.

‘But these days, most of us are too lazy to write. At the headquarters of an army corps, as many as three thousand calls a day are registered. And this, don’t forget, is when there are no operations taking place. What’s more, overhead lines were good enough in the last war. Bombing was a negligible factor. But to-day we like our cables buried. There’s a machine called an excavator for that, which I’ll be showing you.’

‘And say, after all, the cable was broken?’

‘We’ve an auxiliary wireless system ready for operation, from the powerful station that puts G.H.Q. into direct communication with London, down to the brigade post-offices.’

‘And if even the wireless station were destroyed?’

‘Then there are the dispatch-riders, the motor-cyclists you see out on your greasy roads in all weathers, with a layer of mud over their water-proofs and their cases slung across their shoulders.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Each of them has a definite round and serves a certain number of units several times a day. Perhaps you'd care to see an army corps telephone exchange?'

He led me down into a deep cellar, thickly concreted and reinforced with sandbags, railed off and boarded. The operators sat in their earphones, working as they might have been doing in the most peaceful of post-offices. In an adjoining cell were the 'Telexes', which transmitted straight to Headquarters the messages that the uniformed telegraphists tapped out on their keys.

Thus had this imposing cellar, built by some Frenchman with no thought beyond his wine and his coal, become the brain of an army.

7

Three Cheers for the King

The Royal Visit

[13th December, 1939]

‘**T**HE King is coming to France. . . .’
It was first of all a mystery, then a secret, then a rumour. Those who knew did not talk: those who talked did not know. All the same, the visit had to be prepared for. It was then announced that ‘an illustrious personage’ would be coming. The war correspondents used a code when they had to discuss the taboo in front of strangers. They spoke of when ‘Mrs. Harris’ would be coming—when she would be at Arras. A notice put up in the room that was reserved for them read: ‘During Mrs. Harris’s visit the telephone will be open until eleven o’clock’. Prudence justified the liberty.

Finally the troops themselves were told. To see their joy was a joy in itself. Their loyalty had nothing artificial about it. To these men, living on a foreign soil, far from their native cities, their homes and their families, the King’s visit would bring something of England. The face that they all knew, remembered particularly by some at the Coronation,

by others in a scouts' camp, by others in the slums of some great city, would bring back to all of them the pictures that hang on the walls of every farm and cottage, and awaken the poetry of the old country they love so well.

It is a feeling that has nothing in common with the mixture of terror and devotion with which their strange master inspires our enemies. This young man, so unassuming, so pleasant and yet so dignified, personifies a long lineage and a noble history. Twenty-five years ago, his father before him visited the fathers of the men who are welcoming him to-day. The affection which binds the British soldier to his sovereign is, in all its aspects, the affection of a family—a family which has grown into an Empire. In the old days of December, 1914, I saw a soldier without a relative in the world receive a Christmas card signed by King George and Queen Mary. 'You see that?' he said, 'I thought there was nobody. But I had my King.'

That is why the Royal Visit is an important event. It quickens pulses and reawakens energies. For a week the whole army had been giving a more especial attention to its uniform, its arms, its drill. The few careless ones who, in the face of strict orders, sometimes forgot their gas-masks, saw and remembered the King's example of obedience. As for the French villagers, they listened to the cheering of the soldiers, saw the steel helmets and forage-caps

THREE CHEERS FOR THE KING

in the air, looked on in wonder at the massive march-past, and nodded their heads and muttered:

‘Ah, yes. . . . It’s a great country all right.’

Drum and Fife

It would have been hard to imagine a more pleasing setting for the review. In the background an eighteenth-century French chateau, long and low, broken by isolated clumps of fine old trees. Identical sheep grazed quietly up a grassy slope. The whole décor had the noble and wise negligence of the great English parklands. A touch of gold from the group of French and English Generals at the gates. The bands of the Guards, drum and fife, stood massed before the chateau.

A car bearing a tricolour arrived with General Giraud in his long, light coat. The sound of ‘*V’là Castellane qui passe*’ sped across the fields and its notes fell strangely on our ears from the pipes. The motor-cyclists . . . the escort . . . the King. . . . The drummers raised their sticks, immaculately horizontal, to the level of their mouths and it was a God Save the King different from all others, that ended magnificently in a fervent cry from the fifes and a long roll of the drums.

And the March Past. . . . The King stood in the gateway with the French Generals around him. Twenty yards before the saluting-point the officers

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

gave 'Eyes Left', twenty yards beyond it 'Eyes Front'. The heads turned abruptly as if mounted on a single pivot. They were all giants, these men. Battalion followed battalion. One command alternated with the other. The King saluted each platoon all during its march past and never relaxed for one moment except between the companies. He looked young, vigorous, happy.

After lunch the troops paraded on the lawns of the chateau. So long were the khaki lines that their ends were lost in the mist that hung above the hedgerows. The King passed slowly between the ranks and that evening the men would be writing proudly to their womenfolk: 'It was great. . . . I was so close to the King I could have touched him.' The review ended, the Brigadier, his steel-helmet in his hand, opened the gates that had been holding in check that mighty flood of enthusiasm.

'Three cheers for His Majesty the King!'

The British cheers rolled away across the French fields and they in their turn echoed a muffled 'Hurrah . . . Hurrah!'

The sheep browsed on, impassable.

Pooling

When the King moves through one long day from a battery to an air-field, from an infantry brigade to a tank section, it is naturally impossible

THREE CHEERS FOR THE KING

for all the war correspondents to follow him from place to place. But everything must be reported and so they adopted, in the exceptional circumstances, the only fair method possible, which was '*pooling*'. All the information is collected and made available to everybody. Each man takes from the common fund the details he thinks most important or picturesque. What he chooses and, of course, his style, give the article its individuality.

'The King,' the chairman began, 'travelled eighty miles to-day. He left his residence at 8.15 and saw the airmen first. Mr. H——, who was there, will give you an account of the visit.'

'There was a strong and very cold wind,' said H——. 'When the King arrived, the men who had flown over Germany were presented to him and he asked them for a few details of the flight. He then saw the young Flight Commander who brought down a German bomber the other day.'

'What did the King say to him?'

'The King asked how the patrol worked. It was suggested that he himself should give the taking-off signal, which he did. In thirty seconds the men were in the air. Before leaving the air-field, as it was getting colder and colder, the King drank a cup of tea.'

'China or Indian?' asked some purist.

'China.'

'Then,' the chairman said, 'the King visited the

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Nth Division. Mr. W——, who was there, will tell you the story.'

W—— got up and, amongst other things, told how the King had stopped in front of a soldier and said:

'Didn't I decorate you the other day in London for an act of bravery?' Which was found to be correct and called forth long commentaries on the prodigious memory of the Royal Family.

The account continued . . . machine-guns . . . artillery . . . the speech of welcome made by the Mayor of a French village . . . pill-boxes the King inspected . . . lunch. . . .

'Before the King arrived, we went into the inn where His Majesty was to lunch. It was kept by a rather pretty woman of about thirty-five, whose sick child was being attended by an English army doctor. When she learned she was going to receive the King, she went into the nearest town for flowers, which she presented to him very gracefully.'

'What sort of flowers?'

'Red carnations.'

'What was the menu?'

'Chicken Pie, Christmas Pudding, Cheese. The sergeant who waited at the lunch told me afterwards that the King refused the pudding. After the escort had left, we asked "Madame" for her impressions of the King. She said he was very nice and "un-assuming".'

THREE CHEERS FOR THE KING

‘Who was at the lunch?’

‘We are only allowed to mention the Duke of Gloucester, the Commander-in-Chief, and the Corps Commanders.’

Now and again, when one of the narrators waxed sentimental or stilted, the audience, which was possessed of a very lively sense of humour, applauded ironically. But it was rather to conceal their own feelings. They were very proud of their young King who had just acquitted himself of a difficult task with, to use Madame’s expression, such ‘unassuming’ perfection. And they have every reason to be proud.

A Stroll with the Padré

[20th December, 1939]

‘GOOD morning, Padré.’
‘Good morning, Biddle. Out of hospital I see.’
‘Yes, Padré.’

A Church of England chaplain, the padré of these gunners. Built like an athlete, with fine open features that shone happily over his black stock.

The men greeted him cheerfully.

‘It took some time,’ he told me, ‘to gain their confidence. And now they come quite voluntarily to tell me their family troubles. The poor Biddle lad, who just saluted you, managed to make himself very ill indeed a fortnight ago when he got inoculated three times against typhoid.’

‘What, three times?’

‘Yes, three times. You see, when the whole brigade was being vaccinated against typhoid, there were three doctors working at three separate tables. There was a long queue up to each of the tables. The unfortunate Biddle thought he had to go to each of the tables in turn. Hence the three injections.’

‘Good Lord! The reaction must have been pretty violent.’

A STROLL WITH THE PADRÉ

'It was terrific. But anyway, he seems to have got over it.'

The wind and the rain on the plateau were so fierce that it nearly swept our feet off the wooden causeway that led to the battery. And it was a great relief to stumble down the muddy steps into a hole warmed by a fireplace contrived from petrol tins. Nevertheless, the chimney drew very well. Here we found an officer and a few gunners.

'What do you do all day in this hole of yours?' I asked.

'My men write letters and I censor them.'

He looked at the formidable pile that had accumulated on his table and gauged it with an expert eye.

'There's about an hour and a half's censoring there,' he said, 'but by the time I've got 'em finished they'll have written just such another pile. It's appalling!'

At a white wood table the gunners sat writing intensely their interminable epistles.

'But what can they find to say?'

'It hardly ever varies. "I am well. The food is good. We are living in mud. . . ." and the rest's family affairs, household tiffs that last a couple of weeks—which is what it takes to exchange two or three letters. There's also my official correspondence. It's quite funny now and again.'

'For instance?'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'Well you know the *predictor*—that delicate bit of machinery that, given the elements of the problem, tells you where to fire. This machine, as you've seen, is standing there fully exposed to squalls of rain. The other day I saw that it was tarnishing a little inside and getting indistinct. I wrote to the War Office for advice and what do you think they wrote back? "The predictor should be kept in a warm place and protected from the damp."'

'And what was your reply?'

'Just two words: "Says you."'

'One of the most beautiful military replies I've ever heard of,' said the *Padré*, 'was given in India by a captain who had lost a steam-roller, and who was asked by the Government of India for an explanation. On the form he received he wrote, after the words "Reason for the loss", "Eaten by white ants." He never heard another word.'

One of the men came and laid a finished letter on the captain's table. The captain sighed.

'Well, sir,' the soldier said, 'are you obliged to read it? Haven't you any confidence in your gunners?'

'No,' said the captain, 'I know them too well.'

He accompanied us outside.

'No aeroplanes to shoot at?'

'I'm afraid not. There's no hope in weather like this. And what exasperates the men is that during the last fortnight they've had ten warnings or more

A STROLL WITH THE PADRÉ

and each time they've loaded the gun the "all-clear" has been given before they could fire it. So they had to put the shell back again. It was always the same shell and they were soon on the most intimate terms with it. They called it "Arthur". . . .'

'Eventually, unable to stand it any longer, they fired the thing. I don't know at what and I'm not at all sure they know themselves. . . .'

'Anyway,' they said, 'we've got rid of "Arthur"!'

Army and Navy

'Did I hear you say,' said the Scottish Major, 'you were with the Ninth Division in the last war?'

I nodded:

'From August, 1915, to May, 1916 . . . at Béthune, then at Poperinghe, then at Bailleul.'

'Then don't ever leave me. One of the old 'uns of the Ninth, eh? There aren't so many of us here, you know.'

Through the mess-room window we could see the flooded fields, the willows reflected in the still waters, soldiers in balmorals, the trenches themselves. It was a truly Scottish regiment and the 'r's' sounded through the little room like the roll of drums.

'We call this room the "Blue Dog",' the Colonel said, pointing to the animal painted on the door. 'It's forbidden to talk shop in here. We can play,

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

drink, and sing here, but the job has to be left outside. Anybody who breaks the rule pays a fine of two francs. . . . Hullo, it's time for the news.'

A young lieutenant turned on the radio.

'A German pocket-battleship, first thought to be the *Admiral Scheer*, but actually the *Admiral Graf Spee*, was put out of action yesterday by a squadron of three British light cruisers and obliged to take refuge in Montevideo. . . .'

The young faces round the radio lit up and there was a spontaneous cheer.

'The English cruisers carried six and eight-inch guns only. Nevertheless, the light cruisers *Ajax* and *Achilles* scored several direct hits on the German warship.'

I looked at their shining, delighted eyes. And seeing the enthusiasm of these officers, themselves landlubbers, one understood how large the Navy loomed in their thoughts and hopes. Pleased as they might be at a success on land, it took a naval victory to arouse their old national instincts.

'The German communiqué maintains that the wounded on the *Graf Spee* are suffering from the effects of mustard gas shells. . . .'

The young heroes laughed mightily.

'You bet!' one of them said. 'But the rotten part of it is that decent people like the German sailors, who'd probably be disgusted at lies like that, are made responsible by this propaganda. . . .'

A STROLL WITH THE PADRÉ

‘Food!’ cried the Colonel, ‘Food!’

But his staff were unable to tear themselves away from the radio. Outside, a detachment marched by to the swirl of the pipes. During the entire meal the Army would talk of nothing but the Navy.

Rumours

Around the little French town that housed a British Headquarters Staff a rumour was running. Each evening, we were told, the German radio announced with great precision, everything that had happened in the town during the preceding day. Information at such a speed was as surprising as it was disturbing and the Intelligence instituted an inquiry.

‘You say that the Germans have announced that the Headquarters of the Nth English corps is at _____?’

‘That’s so. And, what is more, several times!’

‘It’s most surprising. We’ve our own listeners and they’ve said nothing about it. Have you heard it yourself?’

‘Well. . . . No . . . not myself. It was told to somebody I know by an English chaplain attached to an R.A.F. camp.’

‘And where is the R.A.F. camp?’

‘Oh! Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t know. . . .

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

All I can remember is somebody saying that the English chaplain had very dark hair.'

'Who is your friend?'

'An English journalist.'

'What's his name?'

'I don't know. You see, I only saw him one evening in the café and these English names are difficult to remember. . . . He has a very thin neck. Anyway, he's not the only one who's been spreading the rumour. There's a French soldier, as well, and I know him very well indeed.'

'Go and fetch him.'

Two hours or so later the informant returns with the soldier.

'Is it you who've heard the Germans announcing that the Headquarters of the Nth division are at B——?'

'Yes, sir. Well . . . no, I didn't hear it myself. I sleep in the barracks and have no wireless. It was my wife. . . .'

'Go and get your wife.'

'Just a moment, sir. I remember now that it wasn't her. It was a neighbour who told her all about it. . . .'

'Go and get the neighbour then. . . .'

And so for hours do we stalk the rumour, but in vain.

Commandments

[27th December, 1940]

AN English officer of my acquaintance has drawn up for his men Ten Commandments for the British Soldier in France. Here they are:

I. Remember that in the eyes of the French who see you, you represent England. It is on your uniform, your conduct, and your discipline that they will judge our country.

II. Remember that the farm which is only a temporary cantonment for your battalion is home for some French soldier, whose memories bind him to every object it contains. Ask yourself: 'If the war were being waged on our soil and the French were occupying *my* home, how should I wish them to behave?'

III. If you have come to France for the first time, be careful not to judge the French too hastily. Their customs are different from ours: it is no reason to think them inferior. Remember the last war and the part the French Army played in it. With means which appear small enough to us, France achieved results which are anything but small.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

IV. Tell yourself that attitudes of mind which seem natural to us because they are what we are accustomed to in Great Britain, can, without our realizing it, shock and even wound a Frenchman. We like human beings to treat one another with a certain amount of indifference. Our allies demand more than that. Always show a French friend a little more consideration than you would an English friend.

V. The women of the houses in which you are living will often be under your sole protection. Treat them as you would like your own wives and daughters to be treated in your absence. You will see them in the French country districts engaged in very heavy work and doing their best to replace their men. As far as your military duties allow you, help them.

VI. Strive to become good soldiers. Our enemy is trying by this long respite and these false alarms to lull us to sleep and weary us. Make good use of all this waiting and make exercises of the false alarms. Make yourselves familiar with your arms. Apply yourself to making your battalion, your battery or your squadron a crack unit. What time and tradition have done for famous regiments you now have the opportunity and leisure to do for yours. Attach great importance to the details of your clothing and your discipline. The value of an army lies in its habits.

COMMANDMENTS

VII. France is entrusting to your guardianship a sector of her frontier, which has become our own. It is a great honour. Never yield an inch of French ground.

VIII. Take care never to spread or listen to rumours. The object of enemy propaganda is to sow unrest and panic. Only repeat what you are certain of. Whoever says: 'I haven't seen it myself, but I've heard about it,' may become, without realizing it, an agent of the enemy. Be an example of coolness. Ours is supposed to be a phlegmatic race. It is a fine reputation. Deserve it.

IX. Study the French language while you are in France. Help your hosts to learn English. The task of our two countries is not only to win the war, but to win the peace afterwards. This they will only be able to do if they remain united: they will only remain united if they understand one another. From now on we shall only be strong enough, the French and ourselves, if we are in partnership. This imposes on both of us common duties and common studies.

X. The alliance of France and England has been a political and military necessity: it must become a human reality. These two countries, which need one another, must hold one another in unreserved esteem. It is up to YOU to see that the Englishman is regarded as an ally worthy of trust and affection by ten, twenty—a hundred Frenchmen.

Christmas in Lorraine, New Year in Périgord

[3rd January, 1940]

CHRISTMAS DAY I spent with the British troops, amidst scenery that would have brought joy to the heart of Dickens. No English countryside could have presented a more perfect Christmas setting than did this year the part of Eastern France where our allies are living. A white mist swathed our countryside and clothed it in mystery. One could see for hardly more than fifty yards, but each narrow circle of vision was a fairyland. Every tree and frost-covered bush was a cluster of glittering coral. Even the barbed wire, monstrosity touched by some fairy from Shakespeare, was sheathed in white and for the moment the silver tinsel that glistens from the branches of the Christmas Tree. In the evacuated villages the snow had brought the dead houses back to life. Two laurels in front of an empty inn, powdered with luminous crystal, were sprigs of diamonds. Each garden shrubbery became a cradle, every forest glade a church of white marble. On the roads, French and English soldiers, invigorated by the cold, slithered over the thin coating of ice and

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR

exchanged greetings. Then, as one drew near the line that made contact with the enemy, the silence became intense. No gun fired, no voice or cry broke the enchantment. In the deserted farms no dog barked, no cattle lowed. The mist, masking the opposing lines, enclosed each outpost, each watcher, in a silvery bubble, embellished with the sparkling branches. Indeed, this war-time Christmas may well be for some English and Scottish soldiers, if not the happiest, perhaps one of the most beautiful of their lives.

On the second day of the Year, I got my leave and went back once again to Périgord, back to our old house that has been quickened since the beginning of the war by more than sixty refugees from Alsace. There, too, the snow covered the hills, the woods, the fields and, in the valley, the ruins of the chateau. The folks from Alsace loved it as a reminder of the winters of their own countryside. They told me that when they came to Périgord in September, they were unhappy and restless. Which was only to be expected: they had left everything they possessed, everything they loved: had travelled through two days and nights to come to an unknown province. What would be their welcome? There was the clash of the two dialects. Habits, ideas were different. To-day, after four months, there is harmony, friendship, growing affection. The children of Alsace and the children of Périgord go together to

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

school, build snow-men together, sing in chorus round the Christmas Tree: '*Mon beau sapin, roi des forêts, que j'aime ta verdure. . .*' Two famous styles of cooking confront one another: the housewives of Alsace are acquiring a taste for *clafoutis*: the housewives of Périgord lend their ovens for *Kugelhupf*. The curés of Périgord and the curés of Alsace have pooled their parishes. There is collaboration between the officials of Alsace and the officials of the interior. And so this exodus, which in the beginning seemed so unhappy and painful, will have become, such is the deep unity of France, an opportunity for a more intimate fusion of her provinces. When peace comes the folks of Alsace will of course be happy to go back home, but many of them will not leave their friends of the evil days without sadness. And as we listened to the four-part choir of young Alsatian girls giving the farmer and his wife a delightful New Year's serenade in the snow, a woman sighed despite herself: 'How sad it will be when they're gone. . ..'

11

Liaison

[10th January, 1940]

WHEN one sees described in the books of, for example, General Spears, that Saint-Simon of liaison, the relations between the French and British High Commands from 1914 to 1917, and compares them with the supple harmony of 1939, the long, painful quarrel of the old days seems like an evil dream.

There is a group of men to whom this success is very largely due. They are the *agents* of the *Mission Française de Liaison*. They are officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, and privates who are attached to the various British units. They speak English, of course, but it would be a great mistake to regard them merely as interpreters. The liaison agent is, above all, a soldier and a combatant who, by his knowledge of the two languages, has been called upon to act as a connecting link at every point of contact between the two armies. At headquarters, the liaison officer ensures that orders are transmitted correctly. If French and English are working in the same anti-tank ditch, where the cross-section must be the same throughout and the

casing identical, it is the liaison agent who explains the ideas of the French *Génie* to the Royal Engineers and who takes back the objections of the Royal Engineers to the French *Génie*. This demands on the one hand technical knowledge and on the other diplomacy. And almost always he succeeds admirably. It is curious how attached an English colonel or major becomes to *his* Frenchman. From him he has perhaps learned all he knows of France and her army. For that knowledge he is grateful. 'His' Frenchman is always in the foreground of his thoughts. He is a personal possession. And if some military necessity prompts the *Mission* to withdraw him and replace him, the British officer will most certainly protest. 'Certainly not. . . . We've got used to him. It was he that founded our mess, pacified *Madame*, drew up the firing plans with the French regiment on our right. We can't possibly do without Durand.' And with pride the colonel will say to every Frenchman he meets: 'You know Durand, my liaison? Wonderful fellow!' More often than not Durand is just a nice little Frenchman, like lots of others, but invariably intelligent and energetic: with a thorough knowledge of how to make himself liked. It is thanks to him and his comrades of the *Mission* that everything is going so smoothly and so well.

And God knows that the rôle of a liaison officer is not always easy. . . . A peasant has one horse and

two cows. One day an English car skids and kills the horse. It is cruel luck, but the English army, the farmer's wife is told, will pay. Soldiers arrive to dig a ditch to bury the horse in. The ditch is left open for a few minutes and the superior cow stumbles into it, breaks a leg and has to be destroyed. Meanwhile the second cow has found on the ground a tin of sardines that the British have brought with them, swallowed it and dies of a perforated stomach. . . . You may imagine how many words it costs the liaison officer to discharge his duty of persuading the unfortunate lady that this chain of catastrophic events is entirely fortuitous and that His Majesty's Government are not, in fact, in active conspiracy against her. . . . A magnificent subject for French composition—and Durand will acquit himself of it with distinction.

Brotherhood in Arms

In many of France's Eastern villages, Christmas and New Year celebrations provided French and British troops with opportunities of making one another's acquaintance. Less than a couple of miles from the German frontier, a group of English officers gave a cocktail party to the officers of the neighbouring French brigade. It was a great success. And a little further back, the bagpipes of a Scottish regiment played for one of the French Fortress

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Infantry regiments. The nearest 'crews' (on the Maginot Line a garrison is called a crew) all sent men and although the village had been completely evacuated, its little square was packed to capacity during the concert. *Calots* and balmorals were in every window of the surrounding houses. It was a surprising population, exclusively male and military, but it had colour of its own and gave the pipers a great welcome.

Like the Breton *biniau*, the bagpipes are things of antiquity and the peasantry and they found a responsive chord in the hearts of the Frenchmen, themselves almost all of the land. They were full of admiration for the kilt, now the right of the pipers only, and they listened gravely to the old songs of the Highlands.

'Those folks . . .' said a Frenchman to his lieutenant, 'you can tell they like what they're doing.'

It was great praise. Two ancient civilizations had met and were in sympathy. When the concert was done, having no words in that foreign language with which to express thanks, the Frenchmen discharged the duty gracefully by distributing badges. They could have found nothing to please the British more than the little regimental brooches with their brightly enamelled designs and an occasional motto. The Britons would send them to their wives and sweethearts and write: 'A Frenchman gave it me.'



A STA
LIBRARY
'AD (D)

LIAISON

And the women would be wearing in the streets of Aberdeen badges of the unknown fortresses that are defending them. Then the Scots, having nothing quite like it to offer in return, drew from their wallets photographs of themselves in kilt, sporran, and glengarry and, after an embarrassed moment, handed them to their new friends.

12

Sappers

[18th January, 1940]

THE Frenchman, who knows his own sappers as *Le Génie*, is more than justified in thinking of the Royal Engineers in the same terms. They are, in very truth, the genius of their army. The R.E.s do everything: know everything, everywhere. If you have got to build a solid strong point in the front line, you ask the R.E.s to design it for you. If you want to construct a concrete block-house, the R.E.s will send you the cementers. If you wish to drain your trenches or repair your roads, the R.E.s will turn themselves into roadmen for you. If, during an advance, a bridge must be thrown over a river, the R.E.s are the bridge-builders. If, during a retreat, an abandoned region has to be mined, the R.E.s will prepare the mines and their controls. If you are short of water and are looking for a suitable spot to sink a well, the R.E.s will be your geologists and well-sinkers. Are you organizing transport by rail, canal, or road? In any case, consult the R.E.s. Are you in need of some map or plan? The R.E.s will let you have it. Do you want to repair an old French chateau, install water and electric light, turn

SAPPERS

its cellars into dug-outs, build huts on its lawns? If you are a soldier you will have no other architects, surveyors, electricians, or plumbers than the R.E.s.

'When the waters were dried an' the Earth did appear,
(*"It's all one,"* says the Sapper),
The Lord He created the Engineer,
Her Majesty's Royal Engineer,
With the rank and pay of a Sapper!'

The little house, set in the French countryside, where dwells the Engineer-in-Chief, the Grand Master of all the R.E.s, shelters an infinite diversity of specialists. Side by side with the Geologist, who possesses a perfect knowledge of that part of France, its strata and its resistance in various places: who even in peace-time was visiting the region in which he is interested with the foremost geologists of France, dwells the Camouflager who, tirelessly checking his own intuitions with aerial photography, has come to know from experience what is seen and what is not seen. He it is that studies a photograph and has a too dangerous camp evacuated. He it is that can differentiate between the tracks of the harmless beasts of the field and those that are vehicle-made. And it is he that puts false trenches beside the real ones, false block-houses beside real block-houses, mock guns beside guns: and patiently begins all over again until no photograph can distinguish between the true and the untrue. It is he that camouflages camouflage.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Every time haphazard invention brings into being some new military function, it is handed to that army Jack-of-all-trades, the officer of the R.E.s, admirable product of Woolwich, Cambridge, and Chatham. . . . The R.E.s built the army's first cars. In 1890 they laid the first undersea mines. In 1910 they flew the first military aeroplanes. During that war, which has for some time been known as the Great War and which many of the more prudent are now calling the Four Years War, it fell to the R.E.s to adopt as many as sixteen war babies, from gas cylinders onwards. Already a child has been born of this war—the excavating companies with the very complex machinery they use for their work. Then, as the war baby grows, it wants to live its own autonomous life and leave the apron-strings of the R.E.s. Which is the destiny of all babies. His Majesty's Engineers is the corps of Eternal Parentage.

Mules from India

From beneath the turbans shine velvet-soft eyes. All of them wear the long moustaches of all the Mongols and sit cross-legged, preparing the old, old foods of the Orient. One scooped the moist flour from its bowl, rolled it into little balls that he flattened like pancakes on a large stone: and they in their turn were tossed on to a glowing sheet of

iron, where immediately the dough hardened and blackened. Another mixed ginger, red pepper, and garlic into a sauce to scorch the palate. . . . Several of them squatted round the bleeding carcase of a sheep and divided it with deft strokes of their knives. It was an exotic scene, picturesque and violent. One might have been in one of Kipling's villages, beside Kim's Great Road: yet it was freezing hard and all taking place in some French farmyard. The Indian troops had arrived at the Front.

It was a transport column we were visiting. The Quartermaster-General had said, a few weeks previously: 'When the thaw comes, lorries will be too heavy. I'm going to get some mules.' And he had been as good as his word, for here were mules in hundreds, straight from the Himalayas, with their own sepoys.

'Two months ago,' the British officer said, 'we were in the heart of the mountain tribes that wage their interminable vendettas on the Afghanistan frontier—the vendettas which the Indian Government settles as best it can. Then suddenly we got our marching orders. The men were delighted. It's quite true, strange as it may seem. Even deserters came back to make the journey. Of course, our destination was secret, but everyone knew we were coming to France and the big war. Our colonel went so far as to insist that when the mules kicked

out, they apologized with "*Pardon, monsieur*" by way of practice.'

'Did they stand up to the journey pretty well?'

'Mules,' the major said, 'are beasts that have to be known. They are the offspring of the donkey and the mare: they've all the stubbornness of the one and the courage of the other. Everything new they hate. The first time you put them on a train, you need four drivers to overcome the prejudices of one mule. But once they've adopted the train, they never want to leave it. To start with, they starve rather than eat these unfamiliar oats. Now, however, all that's been straightened out, and everything's going well.'

The mules were manifestly in superb condition. Small, vigorous, with shining coats, they were very much alive and ready for work. Each of them was covered with a light grey cloth. Their improvised stable was open to the air. The Indian Army knows how to take care of its animals.

'And the goats?' I said, 'we had a lot of trouble with the Hindoos' goats in the last war.'

'We've no goats,' the Major said, 'we give them mutton.'

Everything has its day.

Chéchias and Kilts

You have had descriptions of the smart parade a few days ago, when General Gamelin conferred on

General Ironside and General Gort the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. But I should like to return to it just to recall one small, but important detail.

The French detachment which did the honours that day was a company of Zouaves, with band and flag. Service dress had been prescribed—service dress with steel helmets. But that morning one of the High Command present remarked, with justice, that Zouaves without *chéchias* are no longer Zouaves.

‘It’s a pity,’ he said, ‘that nobody thought of telling them to bring their *chéchias*.’

‘That,’ said the detachment commander, ‘is an order which the Zouaves do not require.’

And turning to his men, he said:

‘Which of you have brought your *chéchias*?’

Two hundred hands were raised, and each of them held the red head-dress. And so the Zouaves were able to be Zouaves once again. The English, lovers of tradition, were delighted, and “*Pan, Pan, l’Arbi*”, to the strains of which the troops marched past, recovered all its brilliance and gaiety.

When I spoke to the officers of the detachment that evening, I said how much pleasure the spectacle had given me.

‘You’re quite right,’ the Commander said, ‘an army needs ceremonies and it needs traditions. Because our Zouaves wear the *chéchia*, they feel bound to a glorious past. They are reminded that

they have a prestige to safeguard. Where we're in camp at the moment, I have the colours hoisted every morning and give orders for a ceremonial parade. It maintains rhythm and discipline amazingly.'

'And what are units without the past of the Zouaves to do?' I said.

'If they're well led,' he said, 'they can soon enough create their own *esprit de corps*. Look at the "crews" in the Maginot Line, for example.'

It is all essential. Civilization is made of traditions and costumes. The Scottish kilt, the Zouave chéchia, the Alpine beret, the infantryman's march, each has a magic of its own. And above all now, while we are waiting, it is an excellent thing that military ceremony, strict and stimulating, should help relieve the monotony of work.

In the Maginot Line

[25th January, 1940]

THE three of us, Captain Duncan, a young lieutenant of the French Fortress Infantry, and I, were going up to visit one of the Scottish regiments. The weather was superb. The keen air had made solid ice of the meadowland pools, the streams, and the ponds. The sun coloured the trunks and bare branches of the trees, the simple, graceful village spires and the wooded brows of the hills cut out of a sky of grey and rose. In the background the last undulations faded into a russet mist. Long columns of French army vehicles, horse-drawn, were moving along the road, and Duncan, the 'non-motorizable cavalryman' had waxed sentimental.

'All these horses!' he said. 'Can't you feel the romance of them? They take you back to 1914 and every war of the past. . . . While our modern army with its tractors, caterpillars, and cars conjures up some horrific book of Wells.'

The French lieutenant talked of the British troops in the sector.

'We're more than pleased with them,' he said;

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'this is the first time they've occupied the Line and they're doing the job like old hands. We saw them come up with a swinging stride and well-knit ranks after a dozen miles' march, and were immediately reassured. Their great asset is that they never lose their sang-froid. We asked them only to fire point-blank so as not to give away the machine-gun emplacements. They've obeyed the order to the letter, and as you may well imagine, you need to be pretty cool not to open fire when you feel the breath of an enemy patrol on your neck.'

He stopped to point out on both sides of the road cupolas that were barely visible and the only manifestations of the immense work that lay under this grass-covered hill.

With an experienced eye Duncan looked at the network of barbed wire, the rails, the deep ditches. Before us, beyond the crest, were the Germans: but it was still a peaceful countryside. A heavy battery was firing to our left and the sound of the guns brought a sudden reality to these forts and trenches.

'Your Scots are up there,' the lieutenant said, 'in that village. Their Colonel once made me out a list of the best regiments in the British Army. He put down one regiment of the Guards and nine Scottish regiments.'

'One of which was his.'

'Yes, but he was modest enough to place it last of the nine.'

Already we were meeting on the road men in khaki balmorals, the trousers of their battle-suits pulled in tight at the ankles.

The Enchanted Mountain *

It has been a very real pleasure for Frenchmen to listen to the comments of the British who visit the works of the Maginot Line. Everything in this wall of steel and concrete satisfies and astonishes the mind: and above all, the magnitude of its conception. What has already, before the supreme test, deserved all the wonder and praise is the fact alone that generals and engineers have dared to convert into fortresses not only whole mountains, but a whole range of mountains, that they should have impregnated with fire every inch of the threatened ground all along our north-eastern frontiers and found Government after Government willing to give them the necessary millions.

The lieutenant acting as our guide illustrated its magnitude by a comparison which struck the Englishmen who were with us very forcibly.

‘The Maginot Line,’ he said, ‘has cost about a hundred thousand millions. Which corresponds to

* We know now that the Maginot line-complex was a dangerous disease of the mind; but I publish this as it was written in January, 1940.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

a fleet of a hundred units equal to the finest of the British Navy—a fleet, that is, more powerful than all the fleets of the world put together.’

But it is not only in this that its wonder lies. It is as scientifically precise as it is huge. The English never wearied of poring over the annotated photographs, the firing-maps, the drawings and the diagrams which mean that on a single telephone call of three or four figures, a storm of shells will rain on such and such a segment of wood B17, or such and such a section of territory 243. They were fascinated by the perfection of detail, by the gigantic tower that one man could operate, by the unforeseen machine-gun which, suddenly uncovered, commanded an approach, by the speed of the gas-warning.

‘Even to have thought of it all,’ they said, ‘must have meant years of work.’

‘True,’ the captain in command of the work replied. ‘Hundreds of officers have given years of their lives and energies to make this fortified position what it is. All my crew, apart from a few technical officers, belong to this region. Officers of the Reserve have come quite voluntarily, week after week, to work out and draw up these diagrams that you find so amazing. My crew knows its work as well as sailors know their battleship or cruiser. Each work has a soul of its own. Personally, I find mine fresher, purer than my neighbour’s. As for my

popote. . . . Well, it has to be sampled. You must lunch with us.'

The *popote* of the work at B—— was a little white room, about thirty yards underground, but as gay as the sunniest courtyard of an Andalusian Inn. On its walls one of the crew, who was a painter of considerable talent, had designed a heroi-comic frieze, featuring his superior officer and his comrades. The *popotier*, who, fairly enough, was the youngest lieutenant, got up and announced the menu:

'Les Hors d'œuvre variés aux Barbelés. . . . Les Escargots du Béton. . . . Le Gigot de Mouton requisitionné. . . . Le Camembert au Trot. . . . Le Blockhaus de Semoule. . . . Acides picrique, sulfurique et cyanhydrique. . . . Bon appétit, mon Commandant . . . Bon appétit, messieurs.'

But the *popotier* slandered his cellar, for his picric acid was an excellent *vin de pays*. Conversation was a delicately balanced mixture of serious thought and the broadest jest. The Commander of the work was looked upon by all with a respectful affection, but this did not prevent him from being the butt of classic hoaxes. The section's radio would suddenly deliver for his especial benefit a bogus talk that parodied the authentic ones: letters covered with apocryphal seals would summon him to the War Office. But as soon as the talk strayed to the strength of the fortifications and the need for

terminating the war in a solid and enduring peace, the tone changed. For ten minutes at a time these young men would expound vigorously what was the will of France and then, quickly, the '*Artilleur de Metz*', with everybody swelling the chorus, would make the lamps tremble.

'And now, *popotier*, tell us the story of the Admiral Kornilov.'

'... But this seems hardly the place to tell you why the Admiral's beautiful wife broke coconuts after she'd broken hazel-nuts.'

And while a delicious mirabelle liqueur was going the rounds, one of them gave us the *Blue Danube* on an accordion. And nothing stirs the memory like an accordion. The Captain thought of his approaching leave: a lieutenant passed round a snapshot of his 'brats', two very pretty little girls. My friend Duncan, a little nonplussed by all this un-English noise, but none the less carried away by it, thought of some lovely house in Somerset where he could shoot pheasants: and I myself thought, not without melancholy, how grand it would be to be twenty and one of the crew.

When we left, dusk and mist were closing over the enchanted mountain.

'Sing me again,' Duncan said, 'that *Artilleur* song. . . . I quite liked it. . . .'

British Militiamen Learn Their Jobs*

* At the end of January I spent three weeks in England and saw the new divisions being formed. One of the ministers asked me: 'How do you like them?' I answered: 'They seem very good, but I am like *Oliver Twist*: I ask for more.'

[7th February, 1940]

Tanks

THE hangar was enormous: big enough to house attacking tanks, both heavy and light, and models of motors bisected to show how the machinery functioned. Everywhere groups of from eight to ten young men, separated by screens of stretched packing-cloth, sat round tables on which lay detached machine pieces. Each man wore the mechanic's blue overalls and the beret of our French *chasseurs alpins*. Each group had in its midst its instructor, a commissioned or non-commissioned officer. And all went to make up one of the future regiments of the Royal Tank Corps.

'Blackwell, how many sparks to one complete revolution of the motor?'

What strikes the French visitor is first of all the quality of the instructors, the clarity of their explanations, the precision of their questions, their

patience—their indulgence even. And then the practical nature of the teaching. Of theory there is little or nothing. On the blackboards I saw a few sketches of machinery but never a mathematical formula, and both the instructor and his pupils were immediately more comfortable if they could abandon the blackboard for the object itself. These Anglo-Saxons have recognized the necessity of gaining a solid foothold on reality.

As soon as they know how to take down and assemble their arms, the militiamen start their firing apprenticeship. Around a huge room ran a diorama representing a French countryside, with villages, steeples, isolated farms, haystacks, crossroads. In the midst of it all stood a tank with gun, gunner, and, erect in the turret, a gun captain. A non-commissioned instructor indicated a point on the diorama to the gun captain.

‘Here is a machine-gun opening fire on you. . . . You want to silence it. Give your orders.’

The fair young head nodded vigorously.

‘Left. . . . Ten o’clock (the time indicated the position of the gun on an imaginary dial). A black hedge two finger-breadths from the steeple. . . . Range: 600 yards. Fire!’

The gun was innocent of a shell but a pencil of light struck the diorama at the point aimed at by the gun at the moment of firing. It was too short.

‘Another hundred yards. . . .’

MILITIAMEN LEARN THEIR JOBS

The pencil of light fell on the hedge. The instructor chose another object.

'Right. . . . Half-past four. Range: twelve hundred yards. . . . West edge of the beetroot field. . . . Fire!'

Such is the first course.

Shadow-chasing

We went into an adjoining room and found it contained some curious-looking machines. They were tanks stripped of their armouring and mounted on oscillating transoms to give them the see-saw motion that would be produced by rough country. Before each of the tanks lay a stretch of countryside, not painted this time on a circular canvas but modelled in miniature on a long, earth-covered platform. There were the little cardboard houses, the nursery railway lines, and minute tanks moving over the ground. The *décor* reminded one of the models one sees in museums, while the armouring of the tanks, brought to life by bizarre and brutal movement, might have been something in Luna Park or Coney Island.

But this giant toy which would delight the heart of any small boy is only the instrument of an excellent method of instruction. Seated in his tank, with the butt of his gun at his right shoulder, his

eye on the sight, and shaken by the artificially-produced vicissitudes, the gunner works under what are almost the normal conditions of actual warfare. True his gun does not fire real shells but it fires an air-gun which enables him to judge of the accuracy of his shooting. Tiny pellets struck the houses, the trains, and the tanks. When, a little later, the young soldier is shaken by real ground and his gun fires real shells, surprise will be reduced to a minimum and familiarity a matter of moments. In just the same way the newcomer practises firing with a pencil of light at fast-flying aircraft that are only shadows moving across a white wall.

From the Table to the Ground

Then the tactical course. The youngsters sat in a gallery that ran round a sand-covered table whereon the instructor had modelled a contour to fit the tactical problem to be enunciated. In this countryside were three tiny tanks, to scale. From under the table three of the pupils acted as commanders and had been provided with magnets which enabled them to steer the tanks across the sand.

'We have here,' the instructor said, 'a group of tanks on reconnaissance. They have been told in the morning that their name for the day would be Argo. The group-commander's tank is Argo A, the others

MILITIAMEN LEARN THEIR JOBS

Argo 1 and Argo 2. Argo A is a little way in the rear. The three tanks advance across the country. Advance.'

Mysterious forces operated under the table and the tanks bounded onwards through the thickets.

'From the spinney here' (the instructor indicated it with his cane) 'an anti-tank gun opens fire on Argo 1. Argo 1 immediately conceals itself with smoke-bombs and sends a wireless message to the group commander. What is the message. You, Beeton?'

'Argo 1 to Argo A . . .' (the message followed).

'Good,' said the instructor, 'what is the commander's reply? You, Smith.'

The commander gave his orders. The tanks moved over the sand. Headquarters intervened from its depths. The pupils were completely immersed in the game. Their replies seemed precise and intelligent enough.

'Now,' said the instructor, 'you'll see the same operation outside.'

And soon we were in the snow and wind on the crest of some rising ground that made me think of the battles of Napoleon. Around us the fields and woods, the pools and cliffs and great folds lengthened by the snow stretched into an unseen distance. This was God's table. But for what tragic game? Soon there loomed over the hill a tank, a green, stumbling monster. Then another, Argo 1

and Argo 2. . . . And then, in the rear, according to plan, Argo A. . . . There was something satisfying to the mind in this change of scale. Suddenly, surely enough, gunfire came from a spinney. Argo 1 threw down a smoke-bomb. Behind us a loud-speaker began to splutter, tuned in with the radios of the three tanks.

‘Argo 1 to Argo A. . . .’

Stage by stage the half-real manoeuvre followed the phases of the imaginary one.

From Indoor to Outdoor Gunnery

The scene changed. Real firing called for a clear field and the one chosen by headquarters was ideally situated. It was a long valley flanked by a cliff. Beyond it lay the sea. First of all we saw them firing the smoke-mortar, which is amazingly effective. Three bombs saw the enemy completely blindfolded.

Then a classic target, black and white, began to run across the cliff. A tank manned by cadets moved along the ridge on the opposite side of the valley. The pupils fired machine-guns first and then cannon. The shell was luminous and the red ball made prodigious ricochets over the cliff. The shooting was not perfect but very good considering that it was the first of these exercises for the youngsters.

MILITIAMEN LEARN THEIR JOBS

Hitherto their only training had been with miniature targets and there was the kick of the cannon, the noise of the tank, and the continuous buffeting to upset them. But the progressive method had given them confidence and they came through the test well enough. The target was hit quite often.

The shells bounded forward and reached on the edge of the slope the grass that the sea wind had dried. It caught fire and a ribbon of flame spread up to the snow. The pure fine lines of the cliff stood out against a bay of pale green closed by a long rock. The tanks ran on, their cannons sounding ceaselessly, the red bombs leaping on their way, while in the distance the cloud created by the mortar gradually unravelled itself.

Such was one of the schools of the Royal Tank Corps.

15

The British Army in Training

[14th February, 1940]

Infantry

ONE of England's great strengths is that when she changes her methods, she does so within the old frameworks. Thus it is that she is a democracy within a monarchy: that her physicists win the Nobel prize from mediaeval universities: that having adopted conscription, for her a revolutionary decision, she enlists and trains her young soldiers in the old regiments which made up the former British Army. The Guards, the Warwicks, the Gordons, the Camerons, and fifty others will each have, if need be, ten or fifteen battalions. And so the youngsters of the new army will inherit the glorious traditions of the old.

There is, for instance, a training camp organized under the ægis of one of England's oldest and most famous regiments, the Queen's. Two thousand recruits are learning their jobs there. Amidst what two months ago was a vague, indeterminate countryside, comfortable, well-heated hutments have sprung up: outside them, impeccable lines of kit. All over the frozen fields, the platoons are at work.

Their instructors are those wonderful vertebræ of the Empire, the sergeants and sergeant-majors of the British Army. Huge fellows, deep-chested, formidable of voice, they left their groups at the double as soon as the Colonel appeared, and with a salute of frightening energy and a click of the heels, pulled up short and reported thunderously:

'Sergeant Hill, sir. . . . Third platoon. . . . Fifth week of training. . . . Bayonet-charging, sir!'

As he listened, the Colonel looked the sergeant in the eyes. Each knew in what esteem the other held him. It was military grandeur, without servitude.

We watched the training. It involved setting out in parties of four, rifle in hand, leaping a wall, fixing bayonets, running through a first bunch of hanging dummies, pinning to the ground a second representing riflemen lying on their stomachs, and finally taking a trench. It was all carried out in one frenzied movement. Sergeant Hill was like a man possessed. He set off with each new party, leaped the wall, shouted encouragement to his men, urged them onward and infused them with his own indefatigable enthusiasm.

They looked intelligent, these young soldiers, almost without an exception. Every class of society was represented. The English peer was in the same platoon as the man that farmed his estate, the Oxford classical scholar in the same platoon as his butcher.

'Are you satisfied with them?' I asked the Colonel.

be bombed. During flight the release must be operated at the moment he thinks fit. A luminous signal on the plan shows where the bombs have fallen and immediately reveals the extent of error.

The talking picture is another auxiliary to instruction. The pupils are assembled in a projecting-room. The film is a record of a reconnaissance flight. It starts with the moment the pilot is summoned by his superior officer and receives from him the plan and all necessary information.

'You will follow such and such a road, such and such a river. This is what we know of the enemy's positions. This is what we'd like to know.'

And then the pilot's and the mechanic's preparations. The pupils learn from the memory of what they see, what will make up their life as an officer.

'And now,' the Commodore said, 'Lord H——, who is one of our instructors, will show you the *camera obscura*.'

This was a photographic chamber, about two yards square and situated in the middle of a field. In the centre of the roof was a thick glass lens: under the lens on a table, a sheet of white paper. A pupil receives instructions to bomb a certain point. He goes up and as soon as he enters the field of the camera a tiny black aeroplane begins to move across the paper. The instructor follows it with a pencil and describes the trajectory it makes. Each time the pupil releases a bomb, he lights up beneath his

machine one of those little magnesium lamps used by photographers. A point of light then appears on the white paper. When the pilot comes down again the instructor is able to show him, with complete precision, the differences between the path he has followed and the path assigned to him, as well as the points where each bomb has fallen. It is a simple yet perfect method.

The Lark

'These young pilots the Dominions are sending us,' said the School Commander, 'are splendid—and sometimes a little frightening. The other day I sent one of them up to do his height test. We forbade him to go over ten thousand feet without oxygen. It was a marvellous day . . . sun shining, sky as blue as any sky of Italy. Having got up there, my young Canadian was intoxicated with the purity of it all, like a lark or a poet, and he went on climbing. . . . Twelve thousand feet. . . . Fifteen thousand. . . . And then, I suppose, he lost his head and suddenly dived flat out. They are told to straighten up when they get down to a certain height, but when descent is so rapid the needle lags behind the machine, so my Canadian got almost to the ground at full speed. When I saw the meteor approaching my knees sagged a little and I said to myself: "Poor little devil. . . . That's that. . . ."

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'But that was not that. He landed with a shocking din of quivering stays and metal, but without mishap. Once reassured, I quite naturally lost my temper, had him brought in and said: "All that was just silly. What good did it do? Now you've got an appalling headache."

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I haven't a headache."

"Well then, you've split an ear-drum?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I haven't split an ear-drum."

"Well, in any case, you've behaved in a most ridiculous manner!"

"I see that now, sir," he said, "but it was so lovely up there!"

At that moment, a young man saluted as he passed.

'That's rather a curious case,' said the Commodore, 'he's a young actor who, without ever having been in an aeroplane, had a part in a propaganda film called "The Lion Has Wings". And he liked the part so much that as soon as the film was finished, he took up flying.'

Which all goes to make excellent pilots.

In the Shadow of the Factories

[21st February, 1940]

BY 1938, there was no intelligent and well-informed person that did not know that the growth of Germany's output of war material was such that if Great Britain and France were not to be annihilated, they must smother their repugnance and begin in their turn the labour of war. In England the adaptation assumed two forms. Entirely new factories were set up, while in the shadow of the peace-time industries, war factories were made ready which could take their place when the moment came. They were an ingenious idea, these shadow-factories, for while the obvious course, if one wants to build tanks for example, is to utilize the experience and workmanship of the motor industry, it is far less irksome to create a system of machine-tools that is new in all its phases than to adapt as best one can a system designed for other purposes. By placing the new factory within range of the old, the Government could say to the big manufacturers: 'You will be permitted to continue a very small proportion of your normal production on your dormant system, but the remainder of your

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

workmen will be transferred to the war-work system, although they will continue to be under your control.'

As for the completely new factories, many of them have been conceived and designed by a great engineer—a man who would have delighted Kipling's heart and whom he would undoubtedly have called the Master of the Machines.

'He is an astounding person,' his Minister told me, 'I send for him and say: "I want more A.A. guns. . . . A whole lot more. . . . So many per month starting with July. . . ." "Very well," he says, and leaves for some corner of England which he already has in mind. He sees some wide green field where the sheep are grazing—there is a cricket pitch on it perhaps—has it surveyed and planned, reflects for a few minutes and then says: "That's fine. . . . I'll be putting one workshop here, another there. . . . The machinery will be there . . . in two months. The first guns will leave the factory in three months and four days. . . ." Whereupon he has a platform of concrete laid over the field, on which he makes his reservations for the machine emplacements, for from that very moment he sees his factory as if it were already standing there completed. Then he scours Great Britain, Europe, America, and buys the machines he wants wherever he finds them. By the time they have been brought home, the concrete is ready. He has them installed in their appointed

places, protects them with tarpaulin and says: "We are now in production." Now and again somebody says to him: "What about the walls? And the roof?" "Roof?" he will say, "what's the use of a roof? At least, it's not indispensable. What we want in war-time is guns. . . ." And three months and four days after his first visit—I can vouch for this—the guns leave the factory.'

Relations with France

Mr. Burgin, Minister of Supply, speaks excellent French:

'My relations with M. Dautry?' he said (M. Dautry is his counterpart in France), 'they amount to close, fraternal collaboration. Each time we meet we have before us a catalogue of every war necessity: raw materials, machine-tools, accessories of all kinds. I ask M. Dautry: "What do you need?" He runs through his catalogue and says: "Here it is. . . . I want so many tons of this raw material and so many of that." If I can I reply, "You shall have it by such and such a date." And then he in his turn asks what I myself require and I say perhaps: "I want ten thousand tons of scrap-iron to cover the two weeks ending such and such a date." He replies: "I can let you have it." This is more than collaboration: it is fellowship. Since the beginning of the war French

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

specialists have made very valuable advances in metallurgy: we were immediately furnished with every detail of the new methods. We ourselves have made some noteworthy mechanical improvements and they were at once placed at the disposal of French industry.

'Sometimes things are more complicated. M. Dautry may say: "I want to speed up the production of such and such a gun and I'm short of barrels."

' "But you're equipped to calibrate them?"

' "Yes."

' "All right then, we will let you have the rough tubes and as compensation you will give us a certain number of finished guns."

'Sometimes there is a clash either between the requirements of the two countries, or, at home, between those of the Admiralty, the Air Force, and the Army. As arbiter, we have the ideal man for the job, a colonel who is at the head of what is called the Priorities Department. His awards are so equitable and competent that they are usually accepted unquestioningly by the services. But in case of doubt, appeal may be made in Great Britain to a Council presided over by Lord Chatfield, and, as a last resource, to the Inter-Allied Supreme Council, which sits sometimes in France and sometimes in England. So you can see that we have left no room in our common task for discord. It is a great advance on 1914.'

Dressing the Eagles

The engineer that showed us over this particular Royal Ordnance Factory was energetic and cheerful. All his life he had made guns and to-day he is making more guns and better guns than ever he did. His was the clear conscience of the man with a trade. He it was who went in 1938 to find all these beautiful machine-tools—in the United States, in France, in Germany even. He looks at a well-made gun with an æsthetic pleasure.

‘When we put this factory into production it was anything but suitable. All sorts of things were missing. There were no cranes to lift the machines: we had to put them in their places with our own hands. But now. . . .’

With a happy gesture he indicated the enormous sheds that housed ten thousand workmen. Giant presses came to grips with the glowing iron: long gleaming gun-barrels slid out of their furnaces, turned a quarter of a circle and plunged vertically into cold water that greeted them with jet after jet of steam. Regularly the piles of finished tubes grew—so many of them that one might perhaps have been in some match-factory of the giants.

‘It’s the quantity they want,’ he said, ‘the demand comes from everybody—England, your own army, the neutrals. At the moment the best form of propaganda is this. . . .’

He patted a great highly-polished barrel affectionately.

'A 4·5,' he said, 'it'll fire to a height of thirty thousand feet with ease. A grand weapon.'

Somewhere else a factory more vast still is making aeroplanes, huge bombers constructed by an entirely new process. It was like some giant Meccano model, and all done with a few components of a very light metal, assembled according to ingenious plans. This method reduces the amount of metal used by two-thirds. And, moreover, since the wings are much lighter than wings of solid metal, the effective weight that can be carried by the aeroplane is correspondingly increased.

'But,' I asked the engineer, 'how can these frail-looking wings stand up to terrific pressures?'

'Think,' he said, 'of a Romanesque church and a Gothic church. The walls of the Romanesque church are massive: in the Gothic church they are broken by airy and fragile windows. Nevertheless the Gothic church is every bit as safe as the Romanesque church. And why? Because the pressures, instead of being spread over the mass of the whole building, are concentrated at certain points—on the pillars and the buttresses. This is the same idea and it has passed every test.'

Over the wings that take their shape from the impeccable junction of these shining metal pieces, innumerable young girls dressed in overalls of a

violet material, sew with meticulous care the canvas which will be the sole bulwark between the pilots and a crash. Needle in hand, they work perched over the machine, their blonde or red heads bent towards the giant wing. Six months ago many of them were in the elegant workrooms of the West End. Now they are the staff of the great tailoress that is clothing the bombers of the Empire. They leaven their zeal with grace, for the violet overalls are very fetching, and now and then there is a flash of slim, silk-sheathed legs below the wide, masculine trousers. There is an arresting contrast between these machines of death, with their bomb racks, their cannon and machine guns, and the tranquil application of these sewers for eagles.

In the last hangar the great birds were assembled for a final examination. As soon as one of them receives its papers an entire wall is lifted to give it egress to the taking-off field and the open air. On the wall a vast map showed the bomber's range of action. To-day the circle that the compasses have traced is the only insuperable frontier.

England at War

[28th February, 1940]

Discipline

ENGLAND is a land of liberty: but the English have long known that liberty cannot exist without discipline. So it is with an especial strictness that they observe their war-time regulations. Their black-out, for example, amounts to a total ban on any light being visible from the outside after a certain hour. A stranger is almost smothered by the darkness of English cities. In London in the evenings, I felt as if I were in some frightening, unintelligible world. The buses, gliding away at unpredictable angles, seemed to swallow one another up. And if I took a taxi I was unable to escape a feeling that I was skirting a forest or driving through some abandoned village, like the villages in the front line in 1918. For with the houses utterly invisible my imagination strove to reconstruct the only setting that could explain such darkness as this.

On the country roads travelling becomes a nightmare. Deprived of powerful headlights and without lighting of any sort in the villages you are quickly

lost. At any moment you may leave the road and drive carefully into a field: or leave behind you, unseen, the hotel you are bound for. You get out at every fork and try to decipher the signposts by the light of a torch. But the torches too have their rules, are shaded and muzzled, and even if shone vertically downwards produce only the most restricted circle of light. But every corner of England accepts this discipline and feels justified, for the airmen say it has first-class results and that navigation by night is rendered infinitely more difficult for the enemy.

Rationing, as far as food is concerned, is not severe. I travelled all over the country and found everywhere, even in the smallest of inns, an abundance of wholesome food. So far the only commodities the consumption of which is subject to any real supervision, are butter and sugar: but even of these the authorized quantities are sufficient. Great progress has been made in the army kitchens. A restaurant proprietor, I learned, has been entrusted with the organization of schools for cooks and the results are doing him credit. And so, although each week sees sad losses as the outcome of German attacks by mine and submarine on the British mercantile marine, what makes these losses so little disquieting is first of all that Britain is well armed against these two scourges, and then that since rations to-day are more than generous, the Government has an immense margin of reduction at

its disposal. England could, without real hardship, reduce by surprising proportions the amount of shipping dedicated to food supplies. And England would do it if it became necessary (and I do not think it will) 'without murmur or hesitation' and will remain good-humoured enough to get fun out of it all.

A Sense of Humour

It is one of the Englishman's happiest traits that even in the most dangerous situations he will keep his sense of humour. The voice on the German radio which daily tries to undermine British morale has been baptized *Lord Haw-Haw* and has become a comedian with a part in every music-hall revue. On the German-Russian alliance *Punch* is publishing at the moment some very amusing articles, in which the principal character is the *S.C.V.A.G.*—'The Senior Commissar for Vaguely Assisting the Germans.' Which does not mean that the English are not taking the dangers of this alliance seriously, but just that they deem a certain gay detachment necessary to their mental health, while the moment for action has not yet arrived.

While I was in England I attended a session of the House of Commons. The subject of the debate was austere enough. The Opposition wanted the Government to include in the War Cabinet a

minister whose especial care should be economic questions. The Government's reply was that the presence of Sir John Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was enough. One might hardly have imagined that this would have been an occasion for amiable and amusing exchanges. But such was the case. Herbert Morrison and Major Attlee, speaking on behalf of the Opposition, were courteous and gently ironical. Sir John Simon, who was defending himself, thanked them for it. Their urbanity, he said, brought to his mind a quotation from Isaac Walton's *Compleat Angler*: "Treat your worm as if you loved it."

An Opposition member then rose to make an amendment. 'I believe,' he said, 'that I know the *Compleat Angler* by heart: the text does not say: "Treat your worm as if you loved it" but "Treat your fish as if you loved it".'

Sir John spoke again: 'The Hon. Member is right,' he said, 'but I thought "your worm" might be more amusing.'

The House agreed with him. Whereupon he added that it was very difficult for him to take part in a debate of that nature. It reminded him of the time when the Lord Chancellor was presiding over the Privy Council and the order of the day was 'Is an orthodox Englishman obliged to believe in eternal punishment?' A celebrated theologian objected. 'It is unfair,' he said, 'that the Lord Chancellor should

have the casting vote on the question before us to-day, since he is himself too evidently interested in the result.'

The Prime Minister, who was stretched out in a bench beside Sir John Simon, laughed heartily, and the whole House found pleasure in Sir John's wit and the Premier's amusement. It was all quite cordial and to me charming: yet such interludes, let it be understood, are far from hindering Neville Chamberlain and the House of Commons from prosecuting the war with energy. Every true civilization can find time for its moments of relaxation and laughter.

Lines of Communication

[6th March, 1940]

THE French Army lives on its own territory. Its regimental depots keep to their accustomed towns. When its men go on leave they travel by the national railways. But the whole British army is, by geographical necessity, an expeditionary force. It is fed, armed, and reinforced by sea, and cannot exist without maritime bases. Hence the organization, provided for in the English military regulations, which cares for the lines of communication. A general commands this immense zone, which comprises the base ports, the advance bases, the food and ammunition depots, the automobile and artillery repair shops, the hospitals and the reserve camps.

To the unknowing, the bases are havens of peace and quiet. 'At the base. . . . That's the place. . . .' sang some ill-informed comedian the other day. The truth is, however, that the men at the bases are doing work that is both hard and essential. It is they that have to unload the ships, feed the troops going through, organize temporary quarters, ensure the transportation of fresh troops up to the front and of

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

the wounded and men on leave back to England. Collaboration with the French authorities is of the very closest, since it is they who provide the buildings, the railways, and the ports. In the old French town where I spent a day when I came back from England, a British General and a French Admiral are showing magnificent team-work.

The General and the Admiral share barracks and hospitals fraternally. In the kitchens of the Naval Hospital the French sailors are entitled to one stove and the English soldiers to the other. On the east stove (the French side) there is a splutter of frying potatoes: on the west stove (the English side) pie-crust comes to the correct shade of golden brown. French and British soldiers share the barrack-rooms. The walls teach: *'Discipline, Courage, Honneur, Patrie.'* The walls of the staircases give you the French for leaving the banisters to your superiors. A universal verity. But on one of the doors, the English have fixed an unedited notice: 'Ladies' Room,' and behind it lies the hearth and home of the young women in uniform.

The Post

The Major who receives and forwards mail for the whole British army is a master of his job. It is fascinating to watch his departments at work.

LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Everything goes forward without noise, haste, or delay. The big bags crammed with letters arrive from England in their thousands and soldiers that were sorters in peace-time and are sorters still, get to work on them immediately. The pigeon-holes follow the arms: Infantry, Artillery, Engineers, R.A.S.C., Headquarters: and then the units: battalions, batteries, columns. Sorting into divisions and sectors, which must be kept secret, is not done until later, and then by other men. If a battalion moves, a coded telegram advises the Base Post Office.

‘Do many letters remain undelivered?’ I asked.

‘No, very few. As you can see, it only needs one man in that quite small corner to classify them. While there remains the slightest chance of finding the addressee, we keep searching. . . . You’ve only to look at this envelope, which has been covered with so many corrections and remarks that we’ve had to stick a piece of paper on it to cope with them all. When every possibility has been exhausted, the letter is returned: but it doesn’t happen very often.’

‘And censorship?’

‘Well, you know that contrary to the practice of the French army, all the men’s letters are censored by their own officers. But if a soldier wants to write things which he’d rather not have read by his direct chief, he is entitled to use a special green envelope which is given him for the purpose, and to seal it.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

The green envelope can only be opened at the Base by our own censors, never in the unit itself.'

'And what if a man writes in a foreign language?'

'We have specialists in all languages . . . even in Arabic and Hindustani. At the moment we are rather struck by the number of letters that are written in French.'

'You've forbidden war godmothers?'

'We certainly don't want the sort of women that try to find a godson by putting advertisements in the newspapers. It's far too easy a game for a spy. But there is a tremendous correspondence which is completely legitimate and harmless between our soldiers and the French people who have been their temporary hosts.'

'And what does this correspondence reveal?'

'The very best of relations—some of them quite touching. Only this morning I read a letter from a Scottish soldier who asked his wife to send Scotch woollens for some French children who were suffering from the cold.'

'Which of all these letters gives you the most trouble?'

'The illiterates'. Their writing's so extraordinary that the censor often finds the text completely illegible.'

I looked round the great shed and saw in its beautiful orderliness all those hempen bags, heavy with tenderness, passion, and the dull, delicious

annals of home, that for millions of creatures are the worth of life itself.

Concert Party

Somewhere in France. . . . An old provincial theatre, its proscenium held up by full-breasted caryatids draped in cloth of gold: a red and gold curtain painted into artificial folds and mock tassels. . . . Filling the auditorium twelve hundred British soldiers—and I, trying to analyse their pleasure.

More than anything they loved to sing a chorus, and they had an uncanny, collective talent for it. An air sung over once was theirs for ever and they were immediately capable of taking up the refrain. Quite often they indulged in two-part harmony. Nobody had asked them to do it. The two choirs were formed at once and instinctively. They never shouted, unless perhaps on some given note for comic effect. They were equally capable of a *pianissimo* if the words demanded it. Just before, the twelve hundred had been whistling an accompaniment to a dance turn: and they had followed the dancer attentively and taken care that the accentuated note should coincide with the fall of his feet: no orchestra leader could have been more adroit. It was a surprising thing, this spontaneous discipline of theirs: it is one of the strengths of their race.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

And the songs they liked best? Above all, the old ones, tested by time. And of the new ones, those that gave them sentiment and humour mixed. They had that evening fervently applauded a violinist who had played old, heart-rending melodies while he engaged in perilous acrobatics. But this strange mixture was far from shocking them: they were, indeed, charmed by it. For they were bathed in their own sentimentality and, fearful of becoming utterly engulfed in it, were relieved when they found themselves in lighter and more volatile surroundings where they could spread themselves with confidence.

And the jokes? They were the jokes, exactly the jokes, of twenty-five years ago. Love, girls, country dialogues, sergeants and officers, football and cricket. . . . Hitler and Goering have taken the places of Wilhelm II and Tirpitz, but the old stories had only to change their names to live their old successes over again. To that audience, Scottish stories were what the stories of Marseilles and its citizens are to the Frenchman. An English-Scottish dialogue split the audience into two laughing camps. The Scots were outnumbered, but more often than not it was their rolling accent that dominated the *mêlée*. Once again their sense of humour found food for laughter in a difference of natures and when the concert was over, God Save the King, religiously sung, restored the unity of the Kingdom.

A Visit from the Commander-in-Chief

[13th March, 1940]

THE French *Mission de Liaison* received General Gort, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, in the market square of a little village inside the military zone where it had installed its school. The setting was simple and typically French. There was the butcher's beside the grocer's and then the stationer's, the tobacconist's and the two rival cafés: in the middle the War Memorial, in the background the *mairie*: over the roofs a steeple: women in the windows, school-children and old soldiers on the pavements. But in one corner a resplendent group was gathered—buglers and drummers, white-gloved, lively pennants on the bugles, white buffalo-hide for the drums. The pupils of the school were doing the honours. Hands slapped rifle butts as one hand and the shop windows reverberated with the call '*Aux Champs*'. It was all very moving, although the occasion of the ceremony was moving in itself. For they were there to pay tribute to two liaison officers who had died in action and to decorate a third who had distinguished himself when he took over the

command of an English patrol whose officer had been badly wounded.

This little feat of arms demonstrated clearly how necessary it is to give liaison officers a more complete military training than the ordinary soldier. And this is what the liaison school is endeavouring to do. It has French instructors who have come from the Sarre to teach the pupils the latest methods of advance-post fighting, and an English instructor who teaches these French soldiers how to handle British arms. English courses in the technical vocabulary of the army, lessons on the organization of the English Army and the general duties of the liaison officer go to complete the instruction. On the day of the ceremony, the Adjutant-General himself was good enough to say a few words to our men about their duties and he did it with such poise and sincerity that everything he said went straight to our hearts.

'The enemy,' he said, 'has only one chance of winning this war and that is by dividing us. It won't happen:* it is further from happening to-day even than it was six months ago. You are among the people who have to combat this propaganda and the best way to do it is to be completely frank with us. If you see the tiniest cloud gathering between one of our units and the civil population, go straight to the commander of the unit and say to him: "Things are

* I still hope this will come true.



The Brigadier at Bailleul

VISIT FROM COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

not going very well here, sir. I think you'd be well advised to look into them." We English, like every other nation, have our faults, but I think we can face the truth. . . . And we like being able to tell it. . . . If one of our officers has something to complain of, he'll let you know with the same candour. And then it is up to you to remember that you are liaison officers and that you must judge of the situation with complete impartiality. A thing said in good time is never dangerous.'

Then followed a field exercise. General Gort seemed pleased with it. Never does the Commander-in-Chief look happier than when he can run over difficult ground, jumping the ditches and negotiating the barbed wire. With his elbows tucked into his ribs and his steel helmet cleaving the wind, he moves too fast for his officers to keep up with him. 'Every inch a soldier,' they say. That day, at the end of the little meal that came after the exercise, the mayor of the locality, who had been present, said as he took leave of the Commander-in-Chief:

'I'm very glad to have met you, General, because now I've seen you I know you're a good man.'

And because it was simple, sincere, and true, this little speech, which I was perhaps the only one to overhear, must have brought the General very real pleasure.

The Shell of the Lobster

[3rd April, 1940]

I HAD visited that part of the line a long time previously. I remembered the stark simplicity of the countryside: the background a line of naked wood, pale trunks reaching up to a heavy sky. 'That will be where the enemy will come from,' the Colonel had said. And then, as far as the eye could see, the clayey plain, red, rich and damp, almost unwaveringly flat.

Yesterday I went back there and the change was astounding. This countryside that had been so empty, was now just one immense mason's yard. A little behind the line of casemates a line of pill-boxes had arisen, finished and complete. And still further back, in the plain, countless little cement citadels were springing up with an amazing rapidity. First there was just a cavity in the clay. Shortly, the metal prongs that were to form the armature pointed upwards. At this stage the blockhouse looks like a cage. Then wooden moulds traced the lines of the walls and the embrasures. It was into these moulds that the cement that the sappers and infantrymen were preparing near by would be poured.

THE SHELL OF THE LOBSTER

'Corporal Scott, how many bags this morning?'

'Eighty, sir.'

'We'd better make it eighty-one to-morrow morning.'

'Very good, sir.'

Corporal Scott was a little man. In peace-time he was the Colonel's groom. In war-time he had been showing a leader's qualities. Here he was promoted and a foreman. His was a hard trade: shifting the gravel and the sand, feeding the mixers, bringing up the bags of cement.

'What do your infantrymen say about all this mason's work?'

'They like it a lot . . . even prefer it to exercises and manoeuvres.'

'I see you have a little narrow-gauge railway for transport.'

'Yes, we found it with a local contractor. He told us that twenty-five years ago his father had hired out the same rails and trucks to the British Army. . . . "I shall leave it to my son," he told us, "one never knows. . . ."'

A little further off, the excavators were scooping out huge anti-tank ditches. They worked, these giant machines, with the movements of timid mastodons. One of them scooped out the earth and threw it back from the defence side, a second built up the slope on the enemy side and a third, a sort of enormous shovel, heaped the earth along the posts to

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

make a wall. Since the invention of the caterpillar tractor, the scale of the war machine has changed.

The sappers are on intimate terms with these monsters. Like the elephant-boys that get their charges to crack nuts for them, they adapt their excavators to a thousand and one jobs. With amazing dexterity the machines drive in the stakes, shift tiny objects, even hand the workers their dinners.

'Your ditch is a fine obstacle, sir,' I said.

'Commanded as it is from all sides by anti-tank guns, I believe it's insuperable.'

'And your anti-tank gunners are accurate?'

'Yes, I was at one of their firing practices the other day. It was quite satisfactory.'

I looked around me and saw the powerful, unbroken fortress that ran along the length of our frontiers. I thought of the very similar picture I had just seen in the French lines and remembered then what Winston Churchill once said to me. I met him in London at a time when England seemed very weak as compared with Germany and I had taken the liberty of telling him so.

'It's quite true,' he replied, 'quite true. But have you ever studied the habits of the lobster?'

I had to admit that this was not one of my normal pursuits.

'Well,' he said, 'there are times in a lobster's life when he loses his shell. He secretes a new one

THE SHELL OF THE LOBSTER

pretty quickly, but while it is hardening the lobster is vulnerable. What is his foreign policy at this time? He goes and lives in a hole in a rock, avoids every combat and waits until his armour is once again strong enough to protect him. England, owing to imprudent ministers, is at the moment moulting. I and a few friends are working to restore her shell, but it is still very soft. That is why we are living in a hole. You may rest assured that it will not be for long.'

Since then, France, already with a solid shield of concrete protecting one of her flanks, has covered the other. The first spring sunshine has hardened our shell. The lobster's policy has not been altogether unsuccessful in our own case.

21

Reconnaissance

[17th April, 1940]

‘D oc! The wireless. . . . We must have the six o’clock news. . . .’

The doctor, who wore the grey-blue uniform of the Royal Air Force, rose from a weighty volume on anæsthetics and switched on.

‘. . . Norwegian troops are entrenched near Elverum, about 80 miles north of Oslo and are resisting German attacks. . . .’

The ten young heads round the table were raised. This room, where the veterinary surgeon in a French village had had his meals, was now the mess of a reconnaissance squadron. Its leader was no more than twenty-five years old. To his officers he was, affectionately, ‘Ginger,’ but his face under the bright hair had a marked strength and his authority was unquestioned. Near him a few officers were either writing letters of their own or censoring their men’s. Outside, the rain and hail beat steadily on the window-panes.

‘In Stavanger harbour a German warship has been sunk by a Norwegian vessel.’

The bell of the field telephone quivered, became insistent: the officer nearest lifted the receiver.

RECONNAISSANCE

'Number N. squadron. . . . Ginger, it's for you. . . . Wing. . . . They probably want us to go and inspect the midnight sun.'

'Wing' meant the headquarters of the senior formation. The squadron leader rose and took the receiver. As he listened he raised his eyebrows a little.

'Very good. . . . Yes. . . . Yes, sir. . . . We'll do that. . . .'

Then, as he hung up:

'Headquarters want,' he said, 'three reconnaissances over Germany: one to-night, another at dawn to-morrow, and the other about nine o'clock. . . . Whose turn to go?'

'Watson,' somebody said, 'Grant, and Turner for night pilot.'

'They're to be at Wing at eight to get their orders.'

The wireless had been turned off. Now there was no sound but the drumming of the hail on the windows. Over the table a heavy silence had fallen. It was not that a reconnaissance flight over Germany was a rare exploit for these youngsters: theirs was a squadron that had photographed the whole Siegfried Line and scores of German hide-outs. But the weather. . . .'

'It's a flap,' said Watson lightly. Watson was one of the pilots that had been mentioned.

From which I understood that this was a time

when things were not all they should be, just as I knew that 'gen' referred to a pilot's general knowledge ('He has a good "gen."'), 'met.' the meteorological report and 'reco.' reconnaissance.

'What was the half-past four 'met.' like?'

'Cloud at two thousand, turning to rain from three thousand: no ice formation at three thousand.'

'Humph!'

Orders

An hour later, I went with Watson to Wing Headquarters, accompanied by his navigator, a sergeant, and his gunner, an aircraftman with laughing eyes. We made our way to the Intelligence Office. On one of its walls hung a large map of Germany studded with red, blue, and gold, to indicate anti-aircraft gun-sites, balloon barrages, and squadrons.

'What G.H.Q. want to know,' said the Wing Commander, 'is whether there are any troop movements of importance in this region.' He stood on a chair and indicated a German province. 'And in this. . . . And if so, in what direction the movements are taking place. . . . Here's your itinerary.'

The sergeant-navigator, serious and painstaking, wrote in the log the details of the route, the reconnaissance signals, the zones to be observed.

The gunner, less concerned, rocked his shoulders and looked at the maps and photographs around him. Below, in the Wing mess-room, Turner, the night pilot, was playing darts while he waited to take off.

'Two tens. You're beaten, Padré. What says the "met."?'

'No change.'

'Right.'

The Return

At dawn the next day, I heard the hum of Watson's machine over the village. I ran to the window. The weather was still appalling and the plane was lost in cloud. I thought of the sergeant bent over his map in the front: the gunner in the tail, watching for the enemy. Towards nine o'clock I went to Wing for news. I had hardly arrived when we were reassured by telephone.

'Watson's back. All's well.'

A car left for the air-field and brought back the three men, still in flying dress and fur-lined boots.

'And in four hours you've been able to go into Germany, observe a wide region, and get back again?'

'Of course. It's not very far.'

'Were you attacked?'

'It seems we were. But I saw nothing, I'm glad

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

to say. My observer and gunner told me afterwards.'

'Was the shooting any good?'

'Not at all good, I understand. What amused my gunner was the sight of an enemy fighter that tried to chase us being fired on by his own guns.'

One of the Wing officers came in with sherry, cheese, and biscuits. While the three men ate, the staff officer heard their account of the flight, following it on the map.

'Many trains on this line?'

'No, sir—just normal traffic.'

'What about this river?'

'A few strings of barges going north.'

'Did you get any photographs?'

'Yes, but I shouldn't think they'd be very good.'

While he answered the questions, I looked at Watson. With his high, fur-topped boots and young face he might have been a boy back from school. The gunner of the laughing eyes was rocking his shoulders to and fro. While the Staff officer spoke to Headquarters, the pilot turned to me.

'Dreams are extraordinary things,' he said, 'last night, before we took off, I dreamed I was on reconnaissance in Germany, but in a train. . . . Yes, I was in some German station. My mother was on the platform and a porter was shouting at me: "*Nach Essen!*" Absurd, wasn't it?'

Narvik

[24th April, 1940]

WE were in the mess at about nine in the evening when the B.B.C. announced: 'An important news bulletin will be issued at about 10.15.' But when 10.15 arrived, all we heard was an orchestra and we were asked to wait a little. The military marches the orchestra was playing sharpened our impatience. At last the English voice came through.

'The following communiqué has been issued by the Admiralty. H.M.S. *Warspite* and the Second Destroyer Flotilla have penetrated Narvik fjord and completely destroyed the German naval forces there. Seven German destroyers have been sunk. . . .'

A quite extraordinary feeling of joy came over me. It was a long time since I had known happiness so real. I saw the faces of my friends around me transfigured. Their elation was mine and together we savoured to the full this first victory of the war.

'The beast has been struck at last. The first trickle of blood to stain the scales of the dragon. . . .'

'*Fafner* will react. He'll fill the four corners of the earth with his smoke and bellowing.'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'He'll be the loser. When an animal's wounded in its vitals it shouldn't waste its strength.'

'What do you mean by its vitals?'

'Its fleet, first of all. . . . Germany's has never been strong. The Narvik affair will have dealt it an almost mortal blow. And prestige. . . . Until now the dragon has struck terror into the heart of the universe. Now he's seen to be vulnerable.'

'And clumsy!' another said. 'What could have been the objects of this move? To keep the iron ore and occupy the coast? The iron ore is lost, and so will the coast be sooner or later. Adolf Hitler is unequalled at subversion and corruption, but his strategy is not so brilliant.'

'That's all very well, but his generals are a different proposition. And his army is still intact.'

'True enough. We're not at the blood and froth stage yet. *Fafner* will still do lots of damage. But all the same, he's bleeding. . . .'

After the victory of Narvik, the German radio was the delight of the mess. Its refusal to recognize evidence, its naïve shifts before it reluctantly acknowledged what had become ancient history, and its general lack of courage were pitiful.

'The German announcer,' said the B.B.C., 'is acquainting his listeners with the destruction of their fleet with a caution which in the circumstances is quite natural. He is breaking the news gently.'

I do not know which editor was responsible for

this 'gently', but it was a great success. And a young British officer is ever a very fair judge of humour.

Highlanders

In 1915 Colonel Bramble's Highlanders wore the kilt, in a tartan of blues, reds, greens, and yellows, stockings and dagger, a glengarry on their heads and a sporran from their belts. They were magnificent and they held all my admiration. I saw them the day after the bitter and murderous battle of Loos, going up into the line of the Ypres salient with their calm unsullied. Their speech was rugged, their bravery silent. No better soldiers ever fought in His Majesty's Army.

The Scottish of this war have almost all of them had to abandon the kilt, replaced now by battle-dress; but they have kept their Highland virtues. Beneath the balmorals with their red or blue tassels, there are the same serious faces, the same vigorously athletic bodies, the same rigid Protestant souls. A few days ago some Highland units took the place of some French units in the front line. It was a simple and dignified ceremony. Within the enceinte of one of the fortified works, the section of French infantry with drums and bugles awaited the arrival of the section of British infantry with drums and bagpipes. The Captain of the French shook hands with the Captain of the Scots. The Scottish sentries relieved

the French. The liaison officers exchanged passwords. The bugles rang out; there was a cry from the pipes. And the Frenchmen moved away to the strains of an old-time march, while the Scots took up their positions in the blockhouse. That was all.

But the following Sunday, in the little town near by, the Scottish treated the inhabitants to a magnificent show. Massed in the market square were the bands of all the units, a hundred pipers and drums heraldic. These were led by their pipemajors, who were themselves conducted by another older than they, a giant of a man that wore a brusque red moustache and imposing dignity. The bandsmen have kept their kilts and I was happy at seeing once again the great variegated squares that distinguished the Gordons from the Black Watch and the Seaforths.

The General arrived. Among those around him were officers so huge that there was no escaping the thought that each of them might in himself have been a gunnery observation post. The large drum-major, a dwarf beside them, lifted his cane. The drummers brought their sticks to the level of their lips. A long roll rose *crescendo*, fell away and died. Then, in response to the magisterial cane, the whole tuneful body began to move, the pipers gravely crossing the ranks of the drummers as they marked the rhythm. The march of the piper is almost a dance. Slowed down sometimes to funeral pace, it

bounds into life at the call of an *allegro*. Time and time again the drumsticks flew into the air, like coloured balls from a juggler's hands. The soldiers in their balmorals formed an immense khaki rectangle, lined with happy faces. The colours shone in the spring sunshine.

'Do you recognize them after twenty-five years?' asked my neighbour, the Colonel Bramble of 1940.

'They haven't changed,' I said, 'and the Germans will find it out.'

He did not reply: he, too, had not changed.

Finishing School

'The Nth Corps,' said Duncan, 'has formed an infantry school for subalterns. Would you care to see it?'

'Very much,' I said.

The Commandant of the School arranged to meet us in the country, at the corner of a wood.

'You'll find a platoon composed entirely of officers and commanded by one of themselves. Yesterday evening I set them a problem:—reconnaissance of a wood beyond the line of advance posts. Each of them has submitted his solution. I've picked out the most ingenious and told its author to see it through.'

'Is the enemy represented?'

'Yes. Each officer is entitled to bring his batman.'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

In our exercises the batmen are the enemy: they like it a lot. . . . It's not altogether unpleasant, waiting, sitting in the grass at prepared positions, while your officer crawls about in the mud carrying your gun and pack!

We were at the corner of a wood that dominated a deep quarry. Aeroplanes turned and roared away, shining in the sunlight: but they were taking no part in the game. The platoon of officers came towards us across the country in what seemed to me too close a formation. I said so.

'The problem,' the instructor replied, 'states that the operation takes place before dawn and in a fog. Otherwise you'd be perfectly right of course. This approach would be impossible.'

There were shots. The enemy responded. The exercise over, the instructor made his criticism. He spoke to the commander of the attack, a young captain with glasses and a fair moustache.

'It was a good move to send your first section against the enemy's flank, but you should have done it when you were inside the wood, not in the open.'

'I just told the leader of the section what he was expected to do. I left the rest to his initiative.'

'Your approach to the wood was too oblique. The fog might have lifted a dozen times.'

During the criticism, I looked at their faces. They were keen and intelligent. The instructor told me that these young officers were working with a

passion that was rare in military schools in time of peace. They were thinking of battles soon to come and their responsibility, and were trying to make themselves worthy leaders.

‘What are you doing with them this afternoon?’

‘Exercise in withdrawing from positions. Then this evening, a night march by compass. I’ve sprinkled it with woods, marshes, and streams. It should be excellent training.’

‘And to-morrow?’

‘In the morning, crossing a canal. In the afternoon, attack in collaboration with other arms. In the evening, a night raid.’

‘It’s a heavy programme.’

‘We’ve got to take advantage of every minute. Sometimes we have a conference instead of going out. All the officers of corps headquarters come and speak to them, and on the last day, the General himself. We should be very glad if you could give them a few words during lunch about the way people are thinking in France.’

Lunch was grilled salmon, potatoes, and a compote. During coffee, I had to get up and improvise as best I could a little address in English. I had already noticed a day or so previously when we were with the Commander-in-Chief himself, that in evidence of his solidarity with the French population his own table was voluntarily subjected to the same restrictions as have to be imposed in France.

PART II

The Thirty Days' War

Maginot Peace

UNTIL the 10th May, 1940, we, the Allies, had lived in Maginot peace. We walked around in French or British uniforms: we did what the military commanders told us: we constructed defence lines. In those lines we had a strange, inexplicable faith. The advance posts of the eastern sector made raids and were themselves raided. All in a spirit that was never the spirit of war. Everything moved slowly. It looked as if there were an infinity of time in which to prepare. We were building an army for all eternity. Ministers told you solemnly that our armament factories would be on their way to reaching their production peak by the spring of 1941. The High Command allowed peace-time scruples, even electoral considerations, to hold up the most urgent military work. I remember having asked a General why the infantry were not being trained in anti-tank and anti-aircraft warfare.

‘The terror spread by this form of attack,’ I said, ‘which will be very great indeed if it’s increased by novelty, will soon be worn down by a few experiences.’

'You're quite right,' he said, 'but manœuvres of that sort would ruin the crops. I should never be allowed to hold them.'

As late as the beginning of May, a few days before the dam broke and the torrent of metal and fire burst through, the parliamentarians were complaining that agricultural leave was insufficient, and the High Command increased it. The great fear of the High Command seemed to be not so much an attack by the enemy as boredom among the troops. There was endless talk in France and England of schemes to make the soldiers forget the war. There were shows for the troops, radio programmes for the troops, recreation for the troops, sport for the troops, books, papers, and magazines for the troops. A thoughtful woman asked anxiously whether it might not be possible to initiate some sort of scheme of war for the troops. But remarks like that got a cold reception.

The experts said the Germans would do nothing this summer, that they would never be able to attack the Maginot Line, impregnable as it was, that they would never dare to take on an additional twenty divisions by invading Belgium, that their only possible fields of operation were Holland and Roumania, but that, in any case, these were unlikely inasmuch as Rotterdam was 'the lungs of Germany' and Roumania already submissive. Only General MacFarlane, the Director of Military Intelligence,

pointed insistently in the interviews he gave us to the strength of the German forces, to the 110 divisions always massed along the Dutch frontier and the gravity of the situation. The other officers said:

‘The D.M.I.’s intelligent, but pessimistic.’

For two months from the 10th March, I was often away from the British Army, having myself become one of the cogs in the leisure machine. Captain de Castellane, a friend of mine and an officer in the French Army, had, at the request of General Billotte, the commander of the armies in the north, asked me to lecture the officers of the Seventh, First, Ninth, and Second Armies on the British character and Britain’s war effort. I welcomed the opportunity gladly and I was first received by General Billotte himself at his Headquarters in a chateau near Chauny. The General, who had been Governor of Paris, I knew to be a pretty blunt individual, but possessed of a lively and precise brain. I had a long talk with him.

‘I’m very glad you’re going to talk to my officers about England,’ he said, ‘there are too many silly stories on the subject. The English are in my group and I know all about them and I’m fully alive to their great qualities. But they are distressingly slow. Here we are after eight months of war and all they’ve got is ten divisions! They want to do too well. They’re finicky. The Germans appreciate the

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

importance of the time factor. There are times when it's better to have mediocre material on the spot than perfect material after the war.'

The Group Headquarters Staff were present at the lunch. They seemed to be men who knew their jobs and, generally speaking, my stay with the French armies left me full of confidence. I met the commanders who were soon after to be thrown into battle. I liked General Blanchard of the First Army, General Prioux of the Cavalry Corps, General La Laurencie and General Fagalde. Along the frontiers which I inspected with those who had organized them by my side were numerous casemates, fortified dummy houses, and tank traps. It was not a Maginot Line—far from it. But it was nevertheless a line, and nobody thought then that the enemy would go round the obstacles without having to negotiate them.

The troops themselves seemed stout enough. I remember, for instance, a march past General Bougrain by motorized dragoons. A mixed cavalry and infantry band played a lively march on a theme from *Faust*: 'Slothful maid still sleeping'.... Vigorously they marched, their heads jerking abruptly to the left a few yards before they came abreast of the General, young eager eyes fixed upon his, the ground ringing under the stamp of feet as the salute was given. . . . The Grenadier Guards could hardly have done better. I should have liked

my friend Duncan to have seen these French cavalrymen.

Yet one evening, when I was with a North African Division, General N—— was wise and sombre. He thought himself that a peace of compromise would be better than a struggle which could go against us.

‘The Germans,’ he said, ‘are far superior in numbers and they’ve more material: the contest would be too one-sided. My men are as good as any, but what can they do against tanks without anti-tank guns?’

After the First Army, which formed the right of the British, I went and saw the Seventh Army which was on our left, and got to know the fine faces of General Giraud and Admiral Abrial.

General Giraud

GENERAL GIRAUD had a reputation in the French Army which rivalled Lyautey's. There were stories of his escape through Belgium from Germany, how in sundry disguises he worked at all sorts of trades and finally got back to our lines. In Morocco, he is supposed to be endowed with the *baraka*, a kind of lucky charm; but his boldness frightened his superiors. Headquarters were always a little afraid of his overrunning his objectives. For the coming battle, the task in Flanders with which G.H.Q. had entrusted him seemed made for his particular temperament. His army formed the mobile wing and was to make a dash as far as Breda if the Germans entered Belgium.

I had often seen General Giraud in Paris, and later at the Front, very tall, dressed in a long, light, close-fitting tunic: but I had never had an opportunity of speaking to him other than formally. So I looked forward eagerly to the two days I was to spend with him.

I was not disappointed. Like Lyautey, Giraud was an aristocrat. A lot of the military men are careful, too careful, in conversation. Even the most

moderate opinions are prefixed with all manner of timid qualifications. What Giraud thought he said straight from the shoulder; planned campaigns, fought them, criticized and improvised. I was captivated by the man's personality.

'In war,' he said, 'you've got to take risks. Reasonable risks, of course. Contrary to what people will undoubtedly have told you, I am no dare-devil—far from it. But I believe in considered boldness. You remember Mangin's attack on the German flank at Villers-Cotterets in July, 1918. I was told to make preparations for the division, of which I was Major-General, to go into action. We had to combine surprise with solidity. There was only one way to do that, which was to group all our tanks together on a very narrow front. The danger was that the division being massed at the rate of one tank every ten yards, it would have been annihilated by a bombardment. But the probability of such a bombardment was slight, since on the previous evening the enemy could have known nothing. A legitimate risk therefore, and I took it. My heart beat fast that morning. We were to attack at 4.35 a.m. I never stopped looking at my watch from 3 o'clock onwards. At 4.30 not a gun had been heard. I began to breathe more easily. . . . 4.31 . . . 4.32 . . . 4.33 . . . 4.34 . . . 4.35. With a terrific din the division moved off and I breathed a long sigh of relief. . . . The *baraka* hadn't let me down!'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

There was another story of Giraud's about his campaigns against the rebel tribes in Morocco.

'I often used to fly into the Atlas mountains on reconnaissance,' he said. 'Like all flying in mountainous country, it was pretty dangerous. My pilot was an adjutant who knew his job, and I've always been fond of the air myself. One day when we were flying over some enemy tribes, we were fired on and a bullet went through our carburettor. The plane of course, began to lose height. . . My first thought was: "We're finished." Around us was nothing but peaks and gorges—no possible landing-ground of any sort. Suddenly, as we fell, I saw to our right a white smudge surrounded at regular intervals by brown smudges. This, I thought, must be a French camp . . . officer's tent in the middle and the native tents around it. I tapped my pilot on the shoulder and pointed to the spot. He understood and made a despairing effort to straighten up, which, although failing to check our fall, managed to direct it towards the particular peak. All this happened in a split second. We went on falling and, as we came over the tents, I saw they occupied a tiny plateau surrounded by precipices. There was about thirty yards upon which to land. Another split second and a terrific jolt. . . I found out later that my adjutant had somehow contrived to capsize his machine on the platform of rock. As for me, I was tossed out and fell precisely on the edge of the

precipice, half of me hanging over the abyss. . . . Well, as you see, I got away with it. . . . The *baraka* again. . . .

Then he told another story when we had been talking about the English, for whose character he has the greatest admiration, but whose slowness he finds very disturbing.

'In war,' he said, 'speed of action is everything. In the same Moroccan campaign, I had to attack a tribe which lived in a well-nigh inaccessible eagle's nest on the top of a mountain. I sent for the C.O. of the Engineers and said: "You see that steep wall? Good. . . . I give you three days to cut a road in it that will take motor transport as far as the summit." He replied politely, but firmly, "Sir, it's quite impossible. A job like that would take three months, not three days." "Very well," I said, "if it's impossible you needn't do it. I'll do it myself." I sent for a Colonel of the Legion and drew up a plan of the road. I asked him to put on the job every man of his own and the nearby regiments, day and night, and I told him it had to be finished in three days. . . . And so it was done . . . and I debouched upon an enemy who didn't expect me and couldn't have expected me and who was beaten without striking a blow. The moral of which is that the best element of surprise is to do just what seems impossible and do it quickly.'

Naturally, I asked General Giraud about the

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

present war. He, too, thought we should not be in a position to attack before 1941.

'It's a most regrettable fact,' he said, 'but we're short of everything. . . . Aircraft! Do you know how many aeroplanes I, the Commander of an Army, have at my disposal? Eight. Just eight. I know of course that there's the Royal Air Force and that it's excellent, but if I want to make a reconnaissance I have to ask General Georges who asks General Gamelin, who asks Marshal Barratt, who asks Vice-Marshal Blount, who has a reconnaissance made for me, but more often than not long after it would have been of any real use.'

'And what if the Germans take the initiative and go into Belgium?'

'Then we'll have to start fighting *this* year, but it'll be difficult. I should have liked to have entered Belgium at the beginning of hostilities and occupied a solid line on the frontier, instead of advancing to meet the enemy—a very risky procedure—as we shall have to. The Belgians would have protested, of course, but that again is a risk to be taken to avoid worse.'

Going back to Lille in his car, he talked about his sons, about their education and the dangers that beset characters in nations too rich and too happy.

Admiral Abrial

‘**W**HEN you arrive at Dunkirk,’ General Giraud had said, ‘go at once to Bastion 37 and ask to see Admiral Abrial. He has a grand official title. He’s the *Admiral Nord*: he holds the rank of an army commander and has under his orders not only the navy but the land and air forces in that sector as well. . . . In fact, he commands the whole of the extreme left. If we advance, I move towards Holland with my army and the Admiral keeps the door open for us.’

A network of barbed wire surrounded the Bastion. A sailor stood on guard before a metal door. Inside, the old fort, with its grass-grown ramparts, was fitted out like a battleship. The Rear-Admiral’s office had the look of a ship’s cabin. The Rear-Admiral himself, Leclerc, had delicate features and a quizzical air. He took me along to Admiral Abrial who from the first glance inspired respect and sympathy. His grave and dignified bearing bespoke uncontestable authority.

He had me shown over his fortress. Its most secret corner was the aircraft intelligence room. It received by telephone from France and England the exact positions of any German aircraft over the

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

North Sea. Within twenty seconds they were transmitted by wireless telephone to our patrol planes somewhere in the sky. Then the map that was spread out over an immense table showed the French machine describing a swift parabola and soon the intercepted German would turn about. When we came out Admiral Leclerc took me out on to the Bastion and showed me the expanse of armour-plating that covered it.

'If ever we're bombarded,' he said, 'we'll still be able to go on working in peace.'

At that time the siege of Dunkirk seemed a most unlikely event. But Admiral Abrial was preparing for it with a whole-hearted energy that neglected not a single detail. During those two days his officers showed me all the defences of the fortified zone. I was struck by the results he had achieved with means that were no more than mediocre. The batteries were for the most part made up of old naval guns, the look-outs were bits of wood lashed together. One wondered whether a storm might not carry them away. But the officers and ratings who manned these superannuated batteries did their job with such confidence and ingenuity that when you saw them your own faith was restored, despite everything. The beach, and it was very long, was one vast system of defences. When the moment came for it to evacuate a huge army, how welcome must have been these blockhouses, the wiring,

the well-placed machine-guns, and the carefully prepared firing-plans! In war, nothing is right unless it foresees everything. Even then, while tranquillity still reigned over this fortified strand, this last fringe of fortifications beside the sea, with the waves curling up to the concrete blocks, presented an unforgettable spectacle. At Dunkirk at that time the channel between the coastline and the sandbanks held a considerable number of merchant vessels.

‘The Dutch fleet,’ the Admiral said.

I remembered the beautiful seascapes of the Louis XIV period. The Dutch fleet had been using this channel as a haven from submarines; but sometimes, at high tide, the U-boats came in over the mine-fields.

When everything had been seen, Admiral Abrial took me home to dinner in his little house at Malo-les-Bains. His ordnance officer was already there with two admirals, Leclerc, whom I have mentioned, and Admiral Platon, since famous as Governor of Dunkirk. At that time he was in command of the flotilla. Admiral Platon’s eyes were clear and candid, his face a sailor’s. He advised me to place Admiral Leclerc’s sarcastic commentary on record and call it: ‘M. Bergeret at Dunkirk.’ Admiral Abrial was more serious. After my lecture on England and the English, he said:

‘I’ve nothing but praise for them. . . . To-day,

yet again, they offered me anti-aircraft guns and searchlights for Boulogne. . . . They possess an amazing amount of material. Their methods of aircraft detection, the results of which you've seen, are marvellous. . . . There's no doubt they've done a magnificent job on the sea and in the air since the beginning of the war. . . . But the mistakes they've made in the past! That it should have been they that allowed Germany to rearm . . . they who did everything at Washington to impose on us naval parity with Italy . . . they who prevented our reconciliation with Italy over sanctions! How they must be biting their lips to-day!

I thereupon said that I thought that the capital error was made in March, 1936, and for that, too, certain English politicians had been largely responsible.

'No,' the Admiral said, 'I think then it was not so much Britain's fault as ours. We had only to march alone. We could have done it, it only meant mobilizing. At that time *our* politicians said: "We must blockade Hamburg." I said to them: "That's not the way to do it."'

I am pleased to see that when I left Dunkirk the following day, I made a note that I had just met three fine men and that if all the other commanders of our navy were as good as they, our leadership was in good hands. Soon the most searching test of all was to prove me right.

Paris before the Offensive

IN April, 1940, the atmosphere was stormy and troubled. Paul Reynaud had taken office. I had a high opinion of his intelligence but was fully aware of the hatred he had aroused in the majority of the parliamentarians. There was a story, too, that he had upset the Belgian Government. He was said to have asked them point-blank, 'Are you with us or against us?' If you are with us, then we must look into our military arrangements together immediately. It's high time.' The Belgian Government, we were told, had refused indignantly.

Between Reynaud, the President of the Council, and Daladier, the Minister for War, the antagonism was no less bitter. Reynaud wanted to replace General Gamelin by General Georges. To this Daladier was absolutely opposed. When the Reynaud Government went before the Chamber, it obtained a majority of one. On the 20th April, it obtained unanimity. That seemed to me reassuring, but a senator I met that evening told me, with fiendish joy, that it was nothing of the sort.

'You don't understand the parliamentary game,' he said. 'It was Reynaud's opponents who canvassed for unanimity, because unanimity is

impersonal, national, whereas a big majority would have meant a personal success for Reynaud.'

The following day I saw Reynaud myself. Walking round his office he disclosed in that voice of his that rings out like the crow of a fighting-cock, what sort of situation he had discovered upon taking office. It was frightening. Tanks, he said, existed on paper only. Anti-tank guns, which the army needed badly, were still in the factories. The Germans had 200 divisions, perhaps 240. We had barely 100. Daladier was making things very difficult for the Government.

'But,' I said, 'Daladier must be a man who loves his country. At times he makes some admirable and, as far as I'm concerned, inspiring speeches.'

'Yes,' Reynaud said, 'I believe he wants to see his country victorious: but he also wants me to fail.'

On the Thursday, I went to the *Académie Française*. The *Académie* was at work on the dictionary. The word *aiguiser* passed without comment, but *aiguiseur* was suppressed and the definition of the word *aile* led to a passage of arms between Abel Bonnard and Georges Duhamel. The previous edition had called a wing 'a muscle'.

'It's quite ridiculous,' said Bonnard, 'a wing isn't a muscle: it's a limb.'

'On the contrary,' said Dr. Duhamel, 'a wing is a muscle. What you eat in the wing of a chicken is the muscle, no more and no less.'

'But,' said Bonnard, 'do you mean to say that what the restaurant proprietor calls the wing of a chicken is not a wing?'

'I'm sorry,' said Duhamel, 'we're making a dictionary of usage. The sense a restaurant proprietor gives a word is part of its usage.'

After a long discussion it was agreed to insert a special remark on the expression '*aile de poulet*'.

The contrast between the tragedy of events and this tender care for vocabulary may seem astounding, but I was glad to see the Académie carrying on with its business despite everything. If everybody had done as much things would have been different.

I spent the rest of the month with the Ninth Army, under General Corap, which was in the region of Vervins, Fourmies, and Charleville, and which was destined to meet the onslaught of the German armoured divisions a few days later. It hardly appeared to expect them. Lieutenant de Jumilhac, who was my guide, said:

'The trouble is that old Corap, though he's a good enough man and has had a fine career, isn't fond enough of banging the drum. . . . An army needs to bang its drums, needs reviews and music—a bit of polish in fact. . . . You'll see it for yourself: the dust is beginning to settle on us here.'

Jumilhac, who was a horse-lover, had a picturesque vocabulary. Talking about the German success in Norway, he said:

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'Quite obviously, it doesn't decide the war, but it's bad. . . . It was our first battle and we lost it. . . . You should never beat a horse in a trial gallop. . . . It gets used to being beaten: it loses confidence in itself. . . . It's like a schoolboy that's always at the bottom of his class: at first it hurts, then he gets used to the idea.'

He also said:

'Two commissioned officers in an office are like two thoroughbreds harnessed to the same phaeton. They can't pass one another, but it doesn't stop them from racing.'

I saw General Corap, who was a man of girth, heavy, but possessed of a good enough brain. He told me how he captured Abd el Krim and also how, at the time of Fashoda, he had been mobilized in Algeria against the English.

On the following day I met two officers I knew who commanded a motor-cycle reconnaissance section, and they took me to dine in their mess. There I found young people after my own heart, who showed me that many of the parts of the Ninth Army were just as good as others. Nevertheless, without being very clear why, I returned from this last tour of the armies with a feeling of uneasiness. The troops in the line seemed good enough, but the disposition was terribly thin. Ten miles behind the line one never saw a soldier. The thought of this emptiness was agonizing. If ever the enemy were to pierce that thin shell. . . .

Into Belgium

WHEN I returned to Paris, I found I was due for leave. I decided to spend this one in Périgord and leave by car at nine o'clock in the morning of the 10th May. On the 10th May at half-past eight, I turned on the wireless '... an announcement,' it said, 'by the Ministry of Information. ...'

I was suddenly apprehensive: these broadcasts by big names had so far brought us more bad news than good. And this time Frossard told us of the invasion of Holland, of Belgium, and the King of the Belgians' appeal. ... All officers on leave were recalled.

I caught a train leaving the Gare du Nord at noon. It was full of French and British officers and I had to stand in the corridor. Spirits generally were high. They were relieved, many of them said, that the war had started at last. Wives who had come to see their husbands off were waiting on the platform until the train pulled out. Through the window of the next carriage, a captain in the infantry was giving instructions to his wife.

'You can take the notes in the left-hand drawer of

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

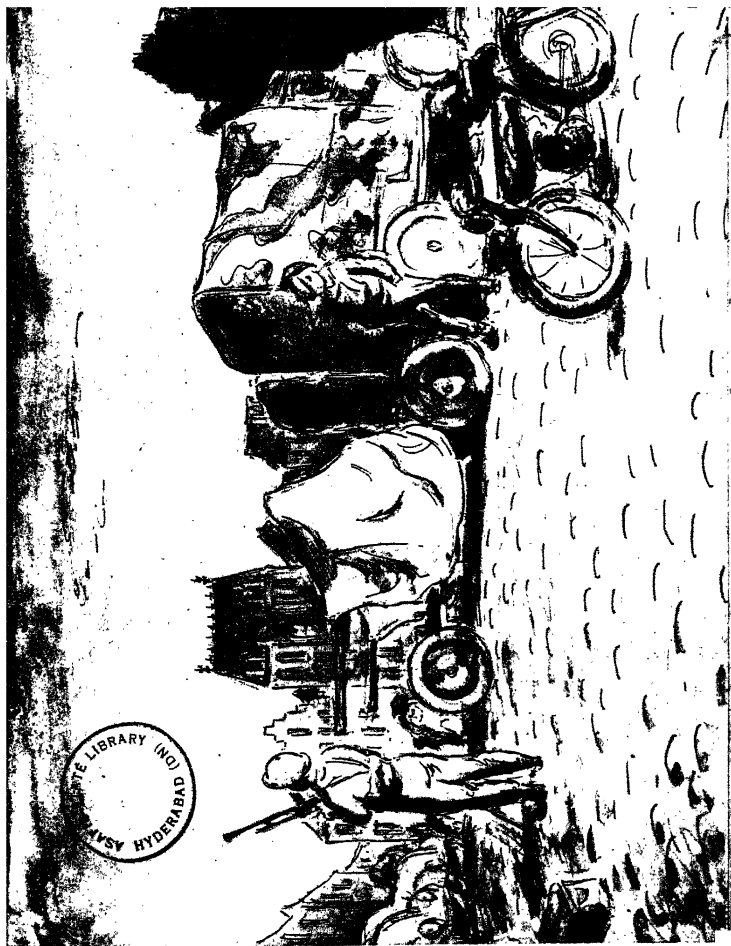
my desk and the change in the drawer of my bedside-table. The keys of the car and the garage are in the little box on my dressing-table. Tell Berthe to put some camphor in the suits I put out. Don't forget to oil Jean's bicycle: it squeaks a bit. . . . Eh? Yes, these two days have been pretty short. . . . But there you are, we might have had nothing at all. . . . If we stop 'em now it may mean the end of the whole business.'

She smiled bravely.

When I got to Arras I went straight to see Colonel Medicott, the Englishman in charge of the Press Department, and was told I could start for Belgium with Duncan on the following day. Our troops had already started to move.

11th May. It was strange, disturbing almost, to find the towns and villages that had teemed with British and French troops now practically deserted. In the line itself work on the anti-tank ditches and blockhouses had ceased. Was it even occupied, all this concrete? I wondered a little anxiously, and, foolishly, no doubt, imagined parachutists taking them over and harassing our own troops as they retreated. It looked to me then as if our armies had left for Belgium with such speed and confidence that nobody had any further thoughts for the back area.

And then I saw it on the march, this British Army that had been straining at the leash for so long in our



Bofors at Tournai, May 1940

INTO BELGIUM

villages of the North-East. Mighty indeed must have been its leap forward, with its hundreds of thousands of men, thousands of vehicles, guns and tanks, three hours after the order had been received. The orderliness and perfection of its movement were beyond praise. The roads I followed were just endless convoys. I saw not a single breakdown or stoppage. The traffic police, calm as if they had been in Piccadilly, were spaced along the pavements directing the moving columns quickly. Long, equal intervals separated the vehicles, making air attack difficult and ineffectual. As soon as a column halted for any reason, the men leaped down and positioned their anti-aircraft guns in the adjoining fields. Nearer the battle-line, I followed soldiers on foot, Scottish marching under the trees on either side of the road in widely separated platoons, like the attacking columns in the last war. They whistled a march as they swung along. Yes, this British Army was an army of very good troops but the pity was, and it was a pity indeed, that there were not enough of them.

The welcome the Belgians gave to the French and British troops was magnificent. The inhabitants stood on the doorsteps of every tiny village, every giant-belfried town. Young girls gave the soldiers flowers. 'God be with you always!' they said, and their faith brought tears to our eyes. Lorries, armoured cars, and tanks were covered with lilac.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

There and then the Belgian children learned the Tommies' gesture that ours had learned eight months before: 'Thumbs up!' '*Tout va bien!*'

Those of the Belgian villagers who knew a few words of English used them to their best advantage. They said to the British officers through the windows of the cars: 'I love you!' Even, magnificently, as the schoolmaster had said to Duncan that morning: 'Gentlemen, you are the right men in the right place!' But almost all of them spoke to me in French. 'You've not been very long coming,' they said, amazed.

In accordance with orders, we followed the Tournai-Renaix-Audenarde road. Just before Brussels, a Belgian policeman diverted the lorries and tanks to the right and refused them permission to enter the city. Duncan, who had made up his mind to have lunch in Brussels, told our chauffeur to carry on and the policeman raised no objections. A few minutes later we were outside the Hôtel Métropole. Here, to our great surprise, we were given an ovation. The crowd shouted 'Vive la France! Vive l'Angleterre!' Women thrust flowers upon us and our car was soon a mass of them. Our chauffeur, a young Cockney, incapable of surprise, found himself beset by admirers and repeatedly kissed.

'What's all this mean,' I said to Duncan, 'why this triumphal reception? If we were generals or

heroes or both I could understand it: but two unknown captains. . . .’

After lunch, I went to the French Embassy and Madame Bargeton explained our triumph. Brussels, being an open town, was completely forbidden to troops, so we, who had gone in by mistake, were in all probability the first French and British officers to be seen on the boulevard. Whence our sensational and brief success.

‘If it’s allowed,’ Madame Bargeton said, ‘come again as often as you can and don’t hesitate to bring your French and English friends with you. I shall be keeping open house for the duration of the campaign.’

The campaign, as far as the French Embassy in Brussels was concerned, was to last three days.

Into the Battle Zone

ANYBODY who was in Belgium at this time must have been struck by the sudden and complete change in the attitude of the civilian population between the first and second days of the Battle. That first day we felt that Belgium was bringing to the struggle courageous and cheerful comradeship: on the second day we saw her gloomy and restless. The women were still on their doorsteps, but they averted their eyes as we passed or perhaps raised them anxiously skywards, searching for hostile aircraft.

'But what can be the matter with them?' I asked Duncan.

'They've had a pasting,' he said.

Bombs had, of course, fallen here and there on the villages, especially at cross-roads and level crossings, but the damage had been slight. Nearly all of them had missed the roads or the railways. There had been two or three casualties, but all in all, the bombs had been few and far between and looked to have been pretty ineffectual. I was wrong. The bombing had produced results of major military importance. Not by the destruction of specific objectives, but by

INTO THE BATTLE ZONE

the terror it had produced. We discovered later that the Germans had an agent in every Belgian village, whose job it was to spread panic.

'Clear out at once,' he would say, 'these bombs are only a warning. Next time every house will be shattered. And then the Germans will come. . . . Go while there's still time!'

Soon we began to meet the refugees. In the early stages just one here and there, then a thin trickle, now a torrent, then a vast flood. They came, wave after wave of them. First the cars of the wealthy, with their neatly piled luggage and liveried chauffeurs, gloved and impeccable. Then the small cars, mattresses tied on the roofs, crammed with strange objects—kitchen utensils and toys which at the last moment the housewife or her child had not the heart to abandon. Followed by cyclists in thousands, one troop for each village, the priest at its head, postmasters and railwaymen in their uniforms, young girls and children thoroughly enjoying the excursion. All with a red quilt rolled round the frame of the machine and a bag on the carrier. Some had brought their dogs in the sidecar. And finally the pedestrians, exhausted and pitiful—women without shoes, thrown by the bombs into the streets just as they were, walking in silk or cotton stockings—barefooted even.

'But you're not thinking of walking a hundred miles like that?' I said to some.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

‘Anything rather than be taken by them.’

There were some heartrending scenes. One woman, having noticed that our lorries and tanks were camouflaged with branches, had picked up four leaves and spread them neatly in line along the top of her baby-carriage. Village firemen had brought their families away on the fire-engines. Some old men were huddled together in a hearse, the feeblest of them stretched out in the place where the coffin goes.

We were suddenly held up at a road junction by a collection of large farm carts, horse-drawn and laden with dishevelled fugitives. It looked like one of the naïve school-book illustrations of the flight of the Gallo-Roman farmers before the invader. Above, a dozen German aircraft were circling over the road. We stopped near a stream shaded by willows. Between the roadway and the stream, in a semicircle of hewn trees, stood a Calvary. When they heard the sullen roar of the bombs bursting near at hand the women scrambled down from the carts and came and knelt before the Cross. And soon a chorus of litanies mingled with the evil hum of the planes and the crash of explosions. The contrast between the softness of the countryside, the quiet charm of the rustic stream, the beauty of the prayers, and the violent machine-made menace from the sky raised me above any thoughts of the danger. Suddenly an old woman in black came and clung to



INTO THE BATTLE ZONE

me, babbling in Flemish. All I could understand was:

'Alles verloren . . . alles verloren. . . '

Alas, like her, we too were soon to say:

'All is lost!'

Duncan, ever a cavalryman, went up to the peasant who had stayed at the head of the horses.

'They're very fine animals you have there,' he said, 'and well kept, too.'

'Yes,' the man replied proudly, 'with these horses I can find work anywhere.'

'Can you feed them?'

'Don't you worry. They won't go short. I've brought more food for them than I have for myself.'

The squadron dropped its last salvo and sped away. We were able to move on. The next village we went through had been hit. An old man was wiping the blood from a wound in his cheek, still smoking the cheroot stuck in his pipe.

'You've been wounded?'

'Looks like it, doesn't it?' he said, with a strong Belgian accent.

'Where did the bomb land?'

'At the bottom of my yard, right on the privies.'

Then we passed the last columns of refugees. We were now in a zone completely emptied of inhabitants and it presented an extraordinary picture. The hamlets I had seen teeming with life on the day before were dead. A convent was burning on the

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

plain to our right, the red flames leaping above its roof-tops. It was all unreal. The names of the villages painted on the signposts awoke memories of Waterloo. There were Mont St. Jean, Gennape, Hougoumont, La Haie Sainte. . . .

'Could that be the Ohian road over there?' I said to Duncan.

A moment later I read: '*OHIAN, 2 kilomètres.*'

We had been told that the British troops would occupy a line along the Dyle, from Louvain to Wavre. After the evacuated area we did in fact meet a few British soldiers. They were busy digging trenches and laying telephone lines just as they had done in the back areas. There were not many of them and the plain looked deserted. Somewhere behind us a battery was firing. A sentry told us we could take our car no farther. We continued on foot and came to a ridge that dominated a little valley. Here we found two Tommies sitting beside a machine-gun, eating bread and cheese. They got to their feet and saluted. Duncan spoke to them.

'What river's this?'

'The Dyle, sir.'

'And what's that on the ridge opposite?'

'The Germans, sir.'

Thus it was that Duncan and I, without knowing it, went into the thick of the Battle of Flanders.

Retreat

WE spent a few more days between Brussels and Lille. Every evening the suburbs of Lille were bombed. It was not very violent or very frightening. But sinister rumours were going the rounds. English officers were tactfully silent when I approached, for they were talking of the disasters that had befallen the French Army at Sedan, disasters of which I still knew nothing. When I got the news I was at first loth to attach any importance to it. When anybody said anything to me about it I replied:

‘Oh yes, it may well be that a few isolated tanks have got through, but what does it matter? They’ll be destroyed sooner or later. They’re in a far more dangerous position than we are.’

But each day the tanks went on advancing and we began to suspect that the situation of the armies in the north might soon become critical. On the 17th May we received orders to fall back on Arras. There we found the Welsh Guards organizing the defence of the city. At all its entrances there were now barricades, sandbag ramparts, and anti-tank rifles.

'But where are the Germans anyway?' I asked.

'At Cambrai,' I was told one morning, 'they'll be here to-morrow.'

I still refused to believe it. That night enemy aircraft flew over Arras and dropped incendiaries, very few high-explosive bombs. Nevertheless one of these latter destroyed the city's principal hotel and that day General Bramble was killed. The bomb fell on to his very room and left no trace of him but his pipe.

One evening, Colonel Medlicott informed me that we were to leave immediately for Amiens. There we found that the city had been invaded by a hundred thousand refugees. It was fortunate that the weather was fine, for men, women, and children were sleeping outdoors on the pavements, their heads propped up on their suitcases. Food stocks in the restaurants had been exhausted. The grocers had run out of provisions. I dined at the Salvation Army canteen off a cup of tea and went to sleep fully clothed. At four o'clock in the morning an English captain aroused me and said:

'We're leaving for Boulogne by car and I'm sorry but we've no room for you. We've had to give up part of our transport. The Colonel wants you to take back to Paris all the French journalists who were attached to our Army.'

'But how?' I said. 'You say yourself you can't let me have any cars. There are a hundred thousand

RETREAT

refugees besieging the station and the Germans are at the gates. Take us to Boulogne.'

I failed to persuade him. It was quite true, in any case, that the cars were full. I abandoned my belongings, forced a way through the flood of refugees and tried to find places for my companions and myself on the last train to leave the station. A mounting tide of refugees besieged the coaches. Each compartment held fifteen to twenty unfortunates. Women who had stayed on the platform were still passing tiny children through the windows. At last, with the aid of a military official, they let us into the luggage-van. It carried fifty metal boxes containing the funds from evacuated stations and banks, and watching over them, full of responsibility, was the guard of the train. His hair was grey, his body built for strength: he was calm and vigorous.

'Nothing doing,' he cried to the refugees, stretching his arms across the door of the van. . . . 'Nothing doing! Not in this one. . . . The finance wagon this is. My orders are not to take anybody and I'm not taking anybody . . . unless under special instructions from the officer there. . . . My good woman, I've got feelings all right . . . and I've got children *and* grandchildren. . . . Only to-day it's not my job to be sentimental but to look after these finances: I shall stick to my orders whatever happens and if any of you try to force this door you'll have

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

me to deal with just to start with. And I might tell you I had four years in the trenches in nineteen-fourteen—nineteen-eighteen with Captain Ziegler, and the thing that can frighten me hasn't been born yet. . . .

'What's more . . . I'll tell you another thing. Some of you've got no business to be here at all. If your district is occupied that's different, but there are others. . . . What have you left home for? Just because a bomb happens to have fallen on your particular village? A nice business! We got a lot more bombs than one between 'fourteen and 'eighteen, and torpedoes and artillery barrages, which are a damned sight worse. We didn't clear out just because of little things like that. . . . What's that? You're not soldiers? That just where you're wrong. In this war we're all soldiers, because they're attacking us all. Hasn't it ever struck you that you're helping the Boche by cluttering up the roads, swamping the stations, and holding up the troop trains? There's only one thing matters now, and that's to win this war. And everybody's got to do the best they can: I've got to watch my finances: you should stay where you belong so long as it's bearable and the Boches don't come along.

"'I'm at war,'" old Clemenceau used to say in my time. *He* was at war and now *we're* at war and it's no good talking. We don't care if our neighbour says that the Germans have been seen at B—— or

RETREAT

D——: the only things we've got to listen to are our superior officer's orders. If you're bombed, every place has got its old soldiers and they'll tell you how to build a good shelter or a big enough hole at any rate. After that all you've got to worry about is a direct hit. And it doesn't happen very often. . . . And if there happen to be thirty German tanks or fifty motor-cyclists wandering about the place you can bet your life it'll take a lot more than that to smash the French Army. A whole lot more!

The train crept forward, very slowly. Above us German bombers with English fighters on their tails, were trying to wreck the permanent way. On the bank women were pointing gleefully from the sky to the ground to let us know that one of the Germans had been brought down. I looked at our guard, who, undisturbed by all the noise, was checking over his boxes of 'finances', and I admired him for it. At that time I was still hopeful. Although when I saw the frightening stream of refugees winding all along the line from Amiens to Creil, I had a feeling that this was a cataclysm we should never be able to stop. . . .

The Defence of Arras

A FRIEND of mine, a French major who for several days defended Arras beside the British troops, has given me the following account of the action.

'You'll remember those magnificent Welsh Guards at the beginning of the War, marching past the saluting point along the boulevards of Paris, and the impression they created by the precision of their movements when they were part of a ceremonial parade. It was they and a detachment of Zouaves that did the honours the day you and I saw General Gort receive his Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. It hardly occurred to me then that a mixed body of these very Zouaves and Welsh Guards would one day defend Arras against the German tanks.

'It was on the 19th May. Armoured columns were reported on the Cambrai and Bapaume roads. During the night the older French troops in my depot had been evacuated. Left practically alone, I went along to the Palais Saint-Vaast, which had up to then been occupied by the British General Headquarters' staff. At the gates I found one of those impeccable sentries with which you're familiar, and

THE DEFENCE OF ARRAS

one would never have suspected from the way he presented arms and clicked his heels that the city had been half destroyed by bombs and that the Germans were in its outskirts. An orderly told me that the offices were in the cellars. I went down the vaulted staircases, along the dusty flagged passages, through the boiler-room and came at length to a vast chamber where numerous officers were working in a quite amazing silence. There was no suggestion of agitation or anxiety. A Scottish major, C——, informed me that the Headquarters' staff were going on to Hazebrouck, that the Welsh Guards would stay and defend Arras and that he himself would be looking after liaison. My offer of services was accepted and he took me along the Bapaume road to see his barricades. The defences looked solid, the men calm and resolute.

'On the following day I was able to get together a few French detachments who had been cut off in the south from the main battle and were passing through the city. I got a grand response from some motorized machine-gunners and a section of Zouaves. I enrolled them. The Zouaves had light tanks and two anti-tank guns. I went back to the Palais Saint-Vaast to place my troops at the disposal of the Guards. The cellars had a different look about them by this time. The little tables were now beds and the officers and their men stretched out on them: the same calm reigned. A sergeant was

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

shaving in a corner. A fatigue party was on the point of leaving to take the outposts their rations and the sentries their hot tea. I got a hearty welcome. The Brigadier-General who commanded the city decided to entrust us with a section of the defences. That afternoon I installed my Zouaves beside the Welsh Guards and there sprung up immediately between these crack troops a rivalry in courage and coolness which it warmed my heart to see after so many bitter days.

‘On the 21st May the enemy attacked the barricade on the Bapaume road. The British, with nothing more than anti-tank rifles, held their positions. They annihilated the crews of three tanks and then, hugging the walls, set fire to the vehicles. The same thing happened in the other suburbs. Everything went as if on manoeuvres. The Germans, surprised at this resistance, abandoned their frontal attack and tried to outflank the obstacle by bringing up artillery. One of their shells fell in the gateway of the Palais Saint-Vaast, killed the magnificent sentry and wounded several other men. The Guards carried the wounded into the cellars and a few minutes later another sentry, every bit as impeccable, guarded the entrance to Headquarters. The imperturbability the Welsh Guards displayed at that moment made me think of the stories that used to be told of the Foreign Legion retreating under fire, never breaking step, every arm shouldered.

'In this way we held on until the 24th May, Arras remaining for the Allied Lines an immovable pivot of immense value had a counter-attack been unleashed. On the 24th, Vimy being no longer in our hands, General P—— received orders to fall in with the general withdrawal. By this time our link with the main armies had dwindled to a narrow earth road leading towards Douai. It was along this that the Welsh Guards marched for more than thirty miles, two-deep, lit up by German flares, decimated by machine-guns. The handsome Scot, Major C——, was seen for the last time making for a German machine-gun, rifle in hand. I brought away what were left of my Zouaves and machine-gunners. They had saved their tanks and one of their anti-tank guns. When we were at last clear and able to call a halt in a village, the Zouaves found, how I don't know, a few chickens and soon had the pot boiling. They bivouacked near the Guards. The battle had forged a comradeship between them. Together they had shown what could be done even against an enemy superior in arms and numbers, by a handful of determined men.'

Royal Air Force

WHEN I went back to Paris, it being quite impossible to rejoin the British G.H.Q., it was proposed that I should go for the time being to an R.A.F. depot. To start with I went to see a fighter squadron which was at that time in Champagne. It was an illustrious squadron, with more than a hundred victories to its credit. The air-field was an air-field no longer; the machines were dispersed over a motley of plots. These were the Hurricanes, those beautiful dragon-flies, incredibly swift, invincible. The mechanics were working under a sun so strong that most of them had stripped to the waist. On the outskirts of a wood, the pilots were awaiting orders. One of them, a slender, fair-haired boy of nineteen, with eyes of forget-me-not blue, recognized and stopped me.

'Surely you came to the training-school in England about four months ago. . . .'

'You're quite right. And here you are in the thick of things.'

'Yes, I was lucky. I joined the squadron on the 8th May, and two days after that the war started. . . .'

The Squadron Leader, who was with me, added: 'He's just brought down his third Heinkel. He looks like making one of our best pilots.'

The boy blushed. I asked him:

'Is it different from what you expected?'

'Yes, it is. Mainly because of the extraordinary speed at which everything goes on here. You are in the air with nothing around you but the sky. Suddenly a black speck appears, then ten, then thirty—and all at once you're in the middle of a great roaring swarm, swirling about you. You have a split second to choose a target and fire. Then they are gone and you're alone once again in an empty sky. . . . It might be a dream.'

'It doesn't seem to leave you a great deal of time to distinguish your own machines from the enemy's.'

'So little,' the Squadron Leader said, 'that we've had to enlarge and increase the markings painted on our machines. By the time the war began, we'd reduced them to practically nothing at all. It was a mistake. . . .'

He pointed out another pilot to me, he, too, fair and blue-eyed. He looked no more than sixteen.

'That one,' he said, 'was baptized the *Enfant Terrible* by a Frenchwoman in one of your villages and the nickname has stuck to him. There's no doubt he deserves it: he's certainly an *Enfant Terrible* to the Messerschmitts. The lieutenant walking with

him we call the *Magister*. It's he who keeps the Squadron's diary.'

'Could I see it?'

They brought along a sort of large exercise-book, and in it, each evening, a few lines had been written in a peaceful, regular hand. I turned at once to the day they called 'The First Day of War'. There I read: '10th May. Lovely day, but we were awakened by a terrific din. Every gun around us was firing at once. We ran to the aerodrome and took off immediately. Before breakfast was ready we had at least six bombers on the list. . . .'

The narrative continued, unconsciously heroic, often ironical. 'Another nice day. . . .' The *Magister* had got four himself, the *Enfant Terrible* five, the C.O. six or seven. A sergeant-pilot had come down in flames in the enemy lines, escaped, thanks to his parachute, got back as far as the Meuse, swum across it and rejoined his squadron. The following day he wrote to his mother: 'I couldn't finish my letter yesterday—had too much work to do. But you needn't worry, for I had time to take some exercise and do a little swimming.'

One day the patrol met a German squadron in far greater numbers. 'The Messerschmitts,' the diary said, 'had the audacity to attack us, with disastrous results for them. . . .' Despite the flippancy of the diary's tone, the reader could tell how terrible that

fortnight had been: men awakened at three in the morning, flying until nightfall, never landing except for petrol and ammunition.

'You must have been exhausted.'

'We were so tired it was all we could do not to fall asleep in our machines. . . . Fortunately, our Vice Air-Marshal came to inspect us. When he saw three days' growth of beard on most of us he understood without our saying a word and had pilots sent out from England to relieve those who couldn't carry on.'

'And the others?'

'We've had a little rest and it'll do. Excitement keeps you going and this is the most exciting sort of big-game hunting.'

'And what are your losses?'

'They don't really amount to much. We've lost machines, which have been replaced immediately, but very few pilots. The bombers have suffered more than we have. As for the Germans. . . .'

On the outskirts of the wood, in the shade of the young trees, a mechanic, stripped to the waist had spread out the Squadron's flag. For every aeroplane brought down he was painting a tiny black swastika.

A Leader

WHEN one has met some of the commanders of the Royal Air Force, one is struck by the strange, indefinable likeness that exists between them all. The fine faces, the blue eyes that have stayed so young beneath greying hair, that mixture of the gentle and firm, that friendly yet serious discipline all belong essentially to the Air Force. The fighter pilot known to his comrades as the *Enfant Terrible*, who to-day says a thousand and one crazy things in the squadron's mess, will in twenty years have grown into this colonel, his hair prematurely whitened by the dangers of his life, distant and betraying, beneath the courteous humour of his nation, a secret sadness—the sadness of a commander who must give to men he loves orders that are both terrible and necessary.

The Group Captain stood in front of a map which entirely covered one wall of the room and showed me his objectives:

‘According to our reconnaissances,’ he said, ‘the principal enemy troop concentrations are here (and his pencil described a vast circle). So their supply lines are these two railways and these roads. These

are the lines which our bombers must cut. The stations and bridges marked by those little yellow flags are the targets which I shall assign to them for to-morrow night. All these big pins with coloured heads indicate anti-aircraft batteries, headquarters, supply bases. You see that chateau with all the pins in it? We've reasons to believe that it houses a section of some importance. Hence the yellow flag.'

'Are your bomber losses heavier than your fighter?'

'Night bombing isn't very expensive, but low altitude daylight attacks on bridges and columns have been tough. On the 14th of May, when the situation to the south and west of Sedan had become critical, we got orders to concentrate everything we had on the points where German reinforcements were streaming through the breach. So we carried out an assault from the air, in collaboration with the French Air Force; we attacked in close formation. The wave of French bombers went first; and then we, in our turn, tried to destroy the bridges. I think we cut two of them. But the German infantry had been better trained than ours to withstand this sort of attack and their motorized columns put up a terrific accompaniment of A.A. fire. We had some losses that day. . . . All in all, the German losses, over the whole battle, were three or four times heavier than ours.'

'Are you sure of that?'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'Absolutely certain. Of course, we don't know what the Germans have in the way of secret reserves. Anything is possible and they've got us used to surprises. But if we take into account only what is known, this much can be said about the present position of the struggle in the air.'

He paused a moment to weigh his words and then went on:

'Firstly: although the German Air Force is numerically superior, it is inferior to ours in quality. . . . Secondly: if one compares the relative figures of the two air forces, our position is better to-day than it was at the beginning of the battle. . . . Thirdly: Germany has lost in a fortnight so large a proportion of her trained crews that she couldn't continue for a month more at this rate without a serious shrinkage in her air force.'

'These are encouraging conclusions.'

'Yes. Only, I would repeat, you've got to be careful with these Germans and mistrust easy victories. We must think the worst and work. . . .'

He picked up the field telephone and gave his orders for the night.

'Number N. . . . Squadron. . . . Your squadron will provide five machines this evening. Objectives: the stations at C—— and at M——, and the chateau in A.L., six miles, 280 degrees from the latter station. Take off at ——.'

His voice was quiet, slow, and clear.

Last Days in Paris

FOR a long time we couldn't believe it, Paris was so quiet and beautiful. Every morning when I opened my window I could see the loveliest of pale blue skies, the trees of the Bois de Boulogne, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Fort of Mount Valérien looking in the mist like a Florentine convent. In the garden below, the *concierge* was watering the begonias of which she was so justly proud. In the flat underneath a workman whistled a military tune as he mended a tap. Nothing had changed. It could not be true that the Germans were getting perilously near Paris.

Then we were bombed for the first time. At first no one could see the planes. One of my children said: 'Look, a swarm of bees!' He had just discovered the two hundred German bombers shining in the sunlight. We did not realize that bombs had been dropped. We thought it was just a demonstration. But after they had gone a friend telephoned: 'It's been very serious. Over a thousand bombs.' We went to see the craters, the ruined houses, the factories that were burning still. So it had been a big raid after all. It was extraordinary to see how little it had impressed the Parisians.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

On Sunday the 9th we began to read in the papers and to hear on the radio quite unexpected names of places. Nantes. . . . Pontoise. . . . Was it possible the Germans were only half an hour from us by car, while we went on living and working just as usual? In the Champs Elysées, the terraces of the cafés were full. We had lunch in the open courtyard of one of the big hotels in the Place Vendôme. There were lots of people at the tables. The only sign of imminent departure was a large number of lorries outside the *Ministère de la Marine*. Sailors were carrying out boxes and papers. We met the editor of a Paris newspaper and asked him whether this meant evacuation. He said the government was divided on the subject. We went to the cinema: it was nearly full. We saw the attack on Narvik and the Paris raid. The tragedy of last week had already become entertainment.

Monday the 10th was the crucial day. Early in the morning we had three telephone calls from political friends. They all said that the government had decided to leave Paris and advised my wife to go as soon as possible. A little later I received orders to fly to London in the afternoon on a short mission. My wife said: 'Before we start packing I want to take a last look at Paris.' We went out at eight o'clock in the morning. We saw the Dôme des Invalides, with its soft golden trophies, walked along the Seine, swathed in a blue mist, said good-bye

LAST DAYS IN PARIS

to the Louvre and then to Notre Dame. We noticed that many Parisians were making the same pilgrimage. Most of the women and many of the men had tears in their eyes, but I heard not a single word of despair. Everyone was alive to the unbelievable charm of the city we loved and were now to leave. We felt certain, too, that a civilization that had produced beauty such as this could not die.

We went back home and, as millions of Parisians must have been doing at that moment, began to ask ourselves what we could save and take with us. I cannot think of anything more distressing than to look around one's familiar surroundings, at the books one has collected with so much care, at the cupboard full of friendly letters, and to think: 'I've only one car, I must choose and I can choose very little.' We chose what we thought was absolutely essential or so dear to us that we could not part with it; and when we had chosen, it was ten times too much. In any case we had not bags enough for all the books and letters, so we went out again to buy them.

I cannot find words to express how much I admired the courage of the Parisians on that tragic Monday. They knew their impending doom. Many of them could not leave. They all carried on with their jobs as well as they were able, as if it had been any ordinary working day. The girls in the shops did all they could to help these unforeseen customers. In the streets the police conscientiously

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

regulated the flow of cars. Some bricklayers were at work on a house. There was no hurry, no disorder, and the gentle behaviour of all made it more heart-breaking than ever to leave the city at such a time.

In the afternoon I drove to the aerodrome. The town was now very empty and the roads leading out of Paris shockingly congested. The weather was hot and thundery. Three weeks before I had witnessed the evacuation of Belgium. But this was the evacuation of a city and not of an agricultural countryside, and I was struck by the absence of men and the fewness of the cyclists. Most of the cars were driven by women and full of children and old people. It was from the plane, piloted by an R.A.F. officer, that I saw Paris for the last time. Heaven knows when I shall see it again, free and happy. I am told by friends who arrived later that evacuation had left it a city half-dead, looking very empty and curtailed by the German barrages on the Seine, but that it remained calm, courageous, orderly, and incredibly beautiful.

12

London

IT was a strange England, tiny and exquisite, that I discovered through the window of the Flamingo. Its winding roads, its pretty villages, its camps, its well-kept lawns on which traces of work could be seen so plainly from the skies, seemed to be part of some delightful exhibition of toys. One's heart tightened at the thought of other airmen seeing these same cottages, these camps, these gasometers, and the bombs hurtling down.

I went straight from the aerodrome to the French Mission. My instructions from Colonel Schiffer on leaving Paris were to make the English public understand the appalling difficulty of the situation and the necessity of sending us immediately whatever forces were available in England. The French *Mission d'Information* took me to the British Ministry of Information. I arrived at the precise moment that the daily press conference was being held. Charles Peake, the chairman, stood me up on the platform there and then and without allowing me a moment's preparation, said:

'If you want to tell people about the situation in France, now's your chance. You'll be speaking to the entire British Press.'

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

I thereupon gave a brief description in English of how things were. I was so moved by France's misfortunes, by the dreadful future that gaped before us that the words tumbled out. I don't know what I must have said, but when I had finished all these boys of the Press, to my great surprise, got up and applauded whole-heartedly. I believe that up to then nobody had told them as frankly how terrible France's position was, how urgently aid was needed, how impossible it was to hang on if reinforcements were insufficient. I was touched by the warmth of their welcome, and inspired to hope again. They would then have willingly given everything to help us, but unhappily they had nothing to give.

This impromptu speech led to another. The B.B.C. asked me to repeat that evening before the microphone not my exact words of that morning but the gist of them. I said this:

'I have just arrived from France, and want to tell you very simply and frankly what the feeling amongst the French people was yesterday. I spent my morning in Paris and was deeply touched by the quiet courage of everybody, men and women. They had been bombed, they knew they would be bombed again, they knew the Germans were on the Seine, a name which means so much to us. Most of them were without news from a son, a husband or a father. Many of them had parents and friends in towns now occupied by the enemy, but all went on

working and doing their usual job as well as they could. The girls in the shops were as obliging and polite as ever, the policemen in the streets regulated the traffic with their usual care, bricklayers were even building a house. Certainly this was not a country that had given up hope. Far from that. Of course, the contrast between the loveliness of the morning and the sadness of the news was heartbreaking. Everyone felt it . . . very little was said about it. All remained silently determined to win this war because all knew what it would mean to lose it. People quoted the beautiful Order of the Day by General Weygand. He praised his soldiers, and certainly French soldiers are fighting at present better perhaps than ever. But they are fighting against incredibly heavy odds. One man against two, sometimes against three. One tank against four. In spite of their inferiority, both in numbers and material, they have up to this day managed to make the enemy pay a terrible price for every French field, for every French wood, for every French village gained. The French communiqué said yesterday that unmistakable signs show that the German Army is beginning to get tired. If we can hold another month, perhaps two months, we shall probably have the worst days behind us, but to hold on we must receive from our Allies and friends, and at once, the greatest possible help. It is not in 1941, it is not this Autumn, it is not even next month that

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

our friends can help us: it is now. We know how magnificently the British Army and Royal Air Force have fought, we know that they have done all that it was possible to do. The time has come to do what is impossible. We have complete trust in our British Allies. We know they are as determined as we are, we know they are ready to throw into this fight all they possess. What we ask them to realize is the importance of time. Remember what we call the Spirit of Dunkirk. Before Dunkirk it was thought impossible to evacuate in a few days from a half-shattered harbour more than 30,000 men. Wild optimists said 50,000. In fact, 335,000 were saved. How was it done? Who knows it better than you do, you who have done it? And if you show once more the spirit of Dunkirk you can also win this battle and this war. For Dunkirk you gave every ship—give now every plane, every man, every gun. Let us together ask America, now so ready to help us, to produce in one or two months what under general conditions would take years. It is impossible, all experts will say, to equip, to train, and to send over in a few weeks a large army. That is quite true. It is impossible, but it must be done and it will be done.'

This was on the 11th June at nine o'clock in the evening. They asked me to come back at 2.30 in the morning to speak to the United States in the same strain but adapted to a different audience. I was

extremely tired, not having slept for two nights. But nothing was more necessary than this broadcast to the Americans, who could still save everything. The next and following days I went on writing articles and talks on the same subject.

What struck me in England was the existence, side by side, of a general and unreserved desire to serve, and a profound ignorance of the true nature of the war. When I described the sad processions of refugees, the bombing of villages, of Paris, the sufferings of our armies, the strength of the enemy—all of which I had thought must be self-evident and common knowledge—I saw with amazement that my audiences were listening to me as if I were a being from some other planet.

What follows here will give some idea of this state of mind. Having received my instructions utterly without warning and, moreover, having lost everything at Arras and Amiens, I had arrived in London without any other belongings than a kit-bag with two shirts and a sponge-bag in it. I had left my country invaded. I had no idea where my wife and children were. I was worried almost to despair. The first English friend I called on realized my distress despite my endeavours to conceal it. Always sympathetic and understanding, he immediately made up his mind to be even nicer to me than usual. He asked me to dinner and then, with a great effort, said:

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

'You needn't change. . . .'

Which, considering that all I possessed in the world was a uniform, made me smile despite my troubles.

I had another significant story from a naval officer. His destroyer had sunk a German ship off the Norwegian coast and taken its captain aboard. The German was a devout Catholic and, as it seemed to the British officers, a man worthy of respect. They treated him very well indeed. Then, as the Commander of the destroyer was spending the night on the bridge, he offered his cabin, the best on the ship, to the German. But down below the German stopped short on the threshold of the cabin and backed away:

'No,' he said, 'this is a trap of some sort.'

'Why?'

'Because it's quite impossible that you'd be giving your Commander's cabin to a prisoner.'

'But why? You're our guest.'

And then, convinced they were in earnest, he stood and looked at them for a long time in silence. Then his eyes filled with tears and he said:

'Ah, you poor lads! You've no idea what you're fighting against.'

There are some who decry these traits. It is just those traits which make England so dear to me. Like every other nation, she has her faults. The

most serious, and the one which has had a hand in our own defeat, is her optimism. Because she has been a happy country, a too happy country, she tends to underestimate danger. Without being prepared she declared war in its most gigantic form against the strongest power in Europe and for a long while nourished the illusion of being able to conquer without departing from her easy and pleasant mode of life in any substantial way. And to this failing must be added the sentimental caprice which makes the country act on impulse and force the hand of its government. It manifested itself on the sanctions question and again at the beginning of the war.

But to-day England's qualities are far more in evidence than her faults. This country knows that it stands alone against the most powerful adversary in the world and awaits attack with exemplary calm. Every English man and woman asks only to be allowed to use every ounce of their energy in the service of the country.

The masses have been put on their guard against the dangers of panic, which was the enemy's most formidable arm in the war on the Continent, and those British masses are proving themselves capable of courage and tenacity. The struggle will be hard, but the power of the Empire, its resolution, and the nobility of its character should surely triumph.

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE

Whatever happens, all those who with me saw life being lived in England in June, 1940, will think with Winston Churchill that in a thousand years posterity will say:

‘ This was their finest hour.’

25th June, 1940.

also by *André Maurois*

THE SILENCE OF COLONEL BRAMBLE

‘The whole is of a piece charmingly harmonious in tone and closely woven together. . . . The book has a perfect ending. . . . Few living writers achieve so great a range of sentiment with so uniformly light and unassuming a manner.’—*New Statesman*.

THE BODLEY HEAD LIBRARY

3s. 6d.

GENERAL BRAMBLE

‘The same lightness and delicacy, the same wicked, yet always kindly, criticism, the same perfection of workmanship.’—Sir John Squire in the *Observer*.

THE BODLEY HEAD LIBRARY

3s. 6d.

also by *André Maurois*

ARIEL

'A charming, aerial, fascinating biography . . . a triumph of the art of arrangement.'—*Times Literary Supplement*.

6s.

BYRON

'A full and straightforward book, just, sympathetic, and vivid.'—*Sir John Squire*.

6s.

DISRAELI

'This is a work of great charm. M. Maurois still remains the picturesque and ironic biographer.'—*J. B. Priestley*.

6s.

DICKENS

'A fascinating biography, accurate in detail and supremely readable.'

5s.

MAPE

'Achieves the direct unaffectedness of a Stendhal or a Defoe.'—*Manchester Guardian*.

3s. 6d.

CAPTAINS AND KINGS

'Wise, witty, and altogether delightful.'—*Star*.

3s. 6d.

